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Binocular Vision

Enchantment and Disenchantment, Metaphysics and Phenomenology on the Late Medieval Stage

Abstract This essay deploys Bruno Latour's *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence* and Bert States's *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* to analyze the pyrotechnics used in mystery plays to symbolize supernatural truths. On the one hand, these effects cultivated aesthetic immersion, allowing audiences to perceive stage illusions as real. On the other hand, they drew attention to their own artfulness, inviting spectators to marvel at human achievement and contemplate the possibility of misfire. This paradox encapsulates the theological ambiguities of medieval religious theater, which asked spectators to suspend disbelief in the name of conversion even as they maintained skepticism about sacred simulacra. Latour's metaphysics allows us to see how mystery plays deployed multiple modes of existence, each of which mediated the others but could not reduce or explain them. States's theater phenomenology shows us how mystery plays used self-given realities like flame to shuttle between human and nonhuman standpoints. If Latour rejects phenomenology for its refusal to consider the agency of the nonhuman, States's focus on reality as resistance offers an implicit retort. I propose a rapprochement by showing that theater phenomenologists and medieval effects masters are both willing to embrace the ontological work of nonhuman actants.

Keywords Bruno Latour, theater phenomenology, mystery plays, special effects, non-human actants

This essay uses Bruno Latour's "flat," "diplomatic" metaphysics and Bert States's theater phenomenology to examine speech acts and special effects in late medieval religious drama. Among special effects (known in the period as *feintes* or *secrets*), I focus on fire and flame, both as metaphors for miraculous or sacramental transformation and as the literal, chemical process of combustion in all its volatility, ephemerality, and unpredictability. On the one hand, I reflect on the place theater occupies in the late medieval devotional cultures that Jacques Chiffolleau dubs "la religion flamboyante": an ardent, obsessive religiosity that replicates the very spiritual crises it strives to

remedy and responds to doubts about what, whom, and how to believe with a compensatory, seemingly insatiable appetite for ritual. On the other hand, I am interested in the pyrotechnics that were ubiquitous on the medieval stage, that were used to symbolize supernatural forces, and that often manifested their resistance to symbolization by misfiring in unanticipated, disruptive, or destructive ways (Butterworth).

Such crossings (as Latour would call them) of belief and doubt, symbolization and resistance, religion and technology will in turn enable me to reflect on the tensions between phenomenology, which (in its Husserlian form) privileges human consciousness by bracketing the world, and the “metaphysical turn” that Latour advocates in his *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*—a metaphysics that rejects subject/object dualism in favor of a “flat ontology” in which “humans and non-humans, large and small, artefacts and organisms, *all equally exist*” (Maniglier 39). I accept Latour’s claim that Modernity in general and phenomenology in particular have bound us to “the narrow focus of human intentionality” and left us with a “dramatic split” between the “cold, absolutely inhuman” world of objects and “a rich lived world of intentional stances entirely limited to humans” (*Pandora* 9). I also seek to show how premodern culture, and medieval mystery plays specifically, ask audiences to bear witness to a principle Latour calls “irreduction”: an awareness that the world is made up of multiple modes of existence and practices of truth and that each is capable of mediating or translating the others but cannot reduce or fully explain them (Harman 11–32). However, Latour may also caricature phenomenology, neglecting what its practitioners have had to teach us about the operations of nonhuman actants in anthropogenic and anthropomorphic networks, including theater. Thus, for States, stage illusions rely on the resistance of “self-given” realities to human intentionality (23) and call on spectators to shuttle between human and nonhuman standpoints, enacting what Max Scheler calls “a continual *desymbolization* of the world” (143, qtd. in States 23). If theater typically resymbolizes self-given realities by enveloping them into spectatorial experience and pleasure, their disruptive effects nonetheless signal the agency of the nonhuman, which acts on us even as we attempt to subject it to epistemological control.

As we shall see, medieval mystery plays are remarkably prone to desymbolization as they use stagecraft to pivot between an anthropomorphic, incarnational worldview and the self-giveness of the world. This oscillation parallels larger cultural and theological tensions between intellectual detachment and ritual adherence, empirical obstacles and the leap of faith. As Jody Enders has argued, in medieval settings, such tensions are constitutive of both theater and religion, which are in turn constitutive—and subversive—of one another (“Performing”). Thus, the firing of special effects is meant to instill faith in miracles

and other supernatural occurrences among spectators but brings with it the risk of misfire, which is essential to the liveness of theater but threatens to erode belief. Likewise, the theatrical staging of the sacraments must illuminate the relationship between visible signs and invisible grace without actually replicating it, for fear that theater will be mistaken for a sacrament or the sacraments for theater. Even as mystery plays proffer signs of the reality of miracles and the efficacy of ritual, they also highlight the capacity of nonhuman actants to desymbolize the stage and the world and thereby to limit human attempts to harness nonhuman or suprahuman realities. In doing so, they remind the medieval Christian audience that their faith commits them to a metaphysics of immanence that relies on, even as it is threatened by, the unpredictable operations of phenomena.

The Magic Circle and the Upsurge of the Real

The records of late medieval, and immediately postmedieval,¹ religious drama attest to a cultural predilection for feats of technical virtuosity in stagecraft and suggest that the mechanisms used to generate stage illusions were animated by a host of unstable paradoxes. This is especially evident in the surviving accounts of a lavish 1536 production of *Les Actes des Apôtres* in Bourges, capital of the province of Berry. One eyewitness, the historian Jean Chaumeau, emphasizes the seriousness that the actors (“hommes graves”) invested in play (“jeux”) and the extent to which their studied simulations (“si bien feindre, par signes et gestes”) caused spectators to believe in the reality of make-believe: “la plus part des assistants jugeoient la chose être vraie et non feinte” (qtd. in Girardot 1; “the majority of those present judged the thing to be real and not simulated”).² Since “la chose” was a staging of the scriptural account of the founding of the Church, it was presumably desirable in this context for theatergoers to mistake illusion for reality, at least provisionally. And yet the account of another eyewitness, the tax collector Jacques Thiboust, suggests how difficult it was to control the ways in which *feintes* shaped truth and belief. He prefaces his narrative of the “monstre,” a costume parade that previewed the production’s most extravagant accoutrements, stage sets, and special effects, by worrying that his descriptions will seem so outlandish to his readers that they will take the “monstre” for a “fable” and Thiboust himself for a liar (qtd. in Girardot 6). He then offers a thorough account of the “monstre” and its *feintes*, often noting both the persuasive power of illusion and the means by which it is constructed. The paradox of the *feintes jugées non feintes* thus coincides with that of the *feintes jugées si feintes* that their truth must be defended against the claim that they have been fabricated, when in fact their very nature is fabrication (*feinte*, from Latin *fungere*, “to fashion”). We are ultimately left with the impression that mystery plays shifted erratically between illusions that

compelled belief and those that beggared it, to the point that reality and virtuality, faith and doubt could not be kept rigorously distinct.

Pyrotechnics played an especially active role in unsettling these dialectics. On the one hand, pyrotechnicians were so skilled at concealing the mechanisms of their craft that they were able to impart naturalness to the staging of supernatural events: gunpowder and sulfur made visions of hell terrifyingly real (and even malodorous); cannons and bombards brought the Apocalypse to life; fireworks gave the illusion of real lightning bolts thrust down from heaven; and vessels filled with burning spirits lent visual immediacy to the Divine Presence (Meredith and Tailby 101–83). On the other hand, even as fire masters pursued the self-effacing techniques of verisimilitude, they made a display of their ingenuity and were acclaimed for their ability to enthrall audiences (Cohen 143–44). Spectators were thus simultaneously called on to *look through* special effects (in order to marvel at the divine or diabolical “choses” they represented) and to *look at* them (in order to appreciate the sheer magnificence of the display and the human achievement involved). This paradox reflected theological ambiguities inherent in the staging of mysterious and miraculous events. Theatrically speaking, mystery plays asked spectators to suspend their disbelief in the name of representational art: audiences were obliged to overlook the technologies of illusion in order to accept stage miracles as mimetically real (“*vraie et non feinte*”). Theologically speaking, however, orthodoxy required spectators to accept that only God’s miracles were truly authentic; audiences were therefore obliged to see *feintes* as illusion, otherwise they might mistake simulated miracles for the real thing or take real miracles, which are by definition implausible, for sham.

To add to this complexity, combustion effects derived much of their thrill from the fact that fire was capable of reasserting its agency in defiance of both theater and religion. If pyrotechnics signaled human control over flame-as-sign, including the ability to conjure heaven’s miracles and hell’s torments in realistic detail without burning the wooden stage down, they also would have signaled what States calls the “exceptional degree of self-giveness” (30) found in certain kinds of theatrical phenomena: in performance, stage animals, running water, and open flame “do not always or entirely surrender their objective nature to the sign/image functions” (29). Rather, they “resist being either signs or images” (29), often resulting in an “upsurge of the real into the ‘magic circle’ where conventions of theatricality have assured us that [the real] has been subdued and transcended” (34). Such effects depend on two fused but opposed modes of spectating—what States calls “binocular vision” (8). The first mode perceives stage phenomena “significantly” (8), that is, as signs of something else, albeit signs that exhibit great “iconic identity” in that they often “*are what they seem to be*” (20). The second mode perceives stage phenomena “phenomenally” (8),

allowing them to *be* what they *are* rather than what they signify. Neither mode can do without the other, and nonhuman actants in particular reveal the liveness that phenomenality introduces into stage spectacle. Thus, the dog who “plays” Crab in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* becomes a sign in spite of itself but typically also manages to reclaim its independence from symbolization. Unaware that it is performing Shakespeare, “Crab usually steals the show simply by being itself” (33), revealing in the process that theater achieves its “vitality” “not simply by signifying the world but by being *of* it” (20) and subject to its contingencies: “What if [the dog] barks? Urinates?” (34). These actions would animate the performance considerably and would thereby initiate a process of resymbolization, but only at the price of breaking the stage illusion and revealing the extent to which nonhuman actants have their own intentionality and are capable of obstructing ours.

If the “upsurge of the real” proves invigorating and amusing in the scene with Crab, in medieval mystery plays, it could be both physically destructive and theologically disruptive, especially where pyrotechnics were concerned. As Enders reminds us, special effects not infrequently misfired on the mystery stage, causing injury or death, as well as considerable debate about attributing intentions to and responsibility for mimetic actions (*Murder*). They sometimes also misrepresented sacred events and consequently exposed religious truths to ridicule, skepticism, and disbelief (“Performing”). These dangers were especially acute during the Reformation, when both Catholic and Protestant theologians worried that they might lose their grip on popular devotion if mystery plays were to supplant other, more direct and sober forms of religious instruction. The phenomenal liveness of the stage featured among theologians’ antitheatrical bias and may have precipitated the decline of medieval religious drama. During an especially rowdy 1541 production of *Les Actes des Apôtres* in Paris, technical glitches caused the Holy Spirit—likely depicted as a dove, flame, or both—to fail to descend on cue, prompting spectators to ridicule the play and its *feintes* and presumably eliciting fears that they might desecrate Pentecost as well, mocking the very idea of God’s existence or his willingness to respond to human need. Likewise, indictments brought against actors suggest that their productions regularly prompted derelict behavior: commoners skipped Mass in order to save a spot for themselves at the play; priests (including even the chaplains at Sainte Chapelle) canceled or rescheduled vespers for the same reason; and festive upheaval caused a decline in almsgiving and scandals of all sorts (Petit de Julleville 1: 424). Faced with simulated miracles that supplanted the liturgy, inhibited charity, and threatened blasphemy, the public prosecutor argued that Parlement ought to impose a ban on all mystery productions—which they eventually did in 1548.

The difficulty was not, however, with the content of mystery plays, which even Calvin granted (in reviewing the script of *Actes* prior to a 1546 production in Geneva) could be “most holy and in keeping with the divine word” (qtd. in Enders, “Performing” 44), but with the “great confusion” (44) that could arise from the genre’s mixture of truth and fabrication. The binocular mode of vision in medieval theater could also easily exacerbate the unstable dialectic of faith and doubt endemic to devotional culture. Audiences must provisionally believe (for fear of apostasy or heresy) that the performance is a well-founded manifestation of transcendent truth; yet they must also grant that that truth is depicted by means of material signifiers that (for fear of idolatry) must not be mistaken for the things they signify even though they often exhibit iconic identity with them. As the failed descent of the Holy Spirit in 1541 attests, audiences were also obliged to recognize that stage phenomena were capable of thwarting symbolization, to the point that an “upsurge of the real” could discredit a miracle rather than reveal it, thereby disenchanting the “magic circle” of the stage and undermining the model of spiritual unity it signified (Rey-Flaud).

If we recast States’s phenomenology in terms of Latour’s metaphysics, we might say that pyrotechnic *feintes* mediate or translate the resistance that is the real and that they operate in a variety of modes of existence, including technology [TEC], reference [REF], fiction [FIC], religion [REL], organization [ORG], and reproduction [REP] (*Inquiry* 488–89). Each of these modes is subject to its own “conditions of veridiction,” to “crossings” with the other modes (which Latour marks with an interpunct), and to “category mistakes” whereby “the veracity of one mode is judged in terms of the conditions of veridiction of a different mode” (17–18). Thus, in the 1536 Berruyer production of *Actes*, the Holy Spirit functioned as an ingenious piece of machinery [TEC] that enabled a mimetic rendering of Pentecost [FIC], which in turn inspired not only aesthetic pleasure for the audience but also a collective effort to imagine and affirm the reality of the Divine Presence [REL]. These modes of existence inevitably crossed on the mystery stage, in that the Divine Presence could only be conjured technically [TEC•REL] and fictionally [FIC•REL], whereas to conjure it sacramentally [REL] would require a real priest and a real altar. These crossings made category mistakes more or less inevitable: if we take Chaumeau at his word, most of the spectators who saw the Berruyer performance mistook [FIC] for [REP] or [REL]; and Thiboust apparently could not imagine a narrative of the *monstre* and its *feintes* that would keep these modes distinct. Even if we do not take these witnesses at their word (and presumably they embellished for rhetorical effect), we know from the 1541 production of *Actes* that the category mistakes they reference were endemic to mystery performances. Here, the simulation of Pentecost failed so spectacularly that [REL] collapsed into, and was

subject to the conditions of veridiction for, [FIC] and [TEC]. As a result, the Divine Presence was momentarily conflated with faulty human invention and theatrical hocus-pocus, prompting anxious officials [ORG] to seek to purify [REL] by censoring [FIC] and to restrict the perilous [TEC•REL] and [FIC•REL] crossings by banning mystery plays altogether.

Latour expresses a similar anxiety about purity in his account of religious category mistakes, and perhaps even a puritanism that risks neutralizing the intellectual resistance inherent in medieval religious experience. Recalling that Bach was accused of blasphemy for composing church music that called too much attention to its own beauty, Latour imagines a churchgoer who “[draws] the conclusion that a Lutheran service is a ‘spectacle’” and thereby enacts the “category mistake” whereby one takes “the pleasure procured by the staging of the mediations for the itinerary of the spirit of conversion [FIC•REL]” (*Inquiry* 277). More seriously, “the faithful” might “[profit] from the music no longer in order to enjoy the arrangement of instruments and voices, but in order to pretend to reach the other world,” even as they “[abandon] their less fortunate neighbors [REF•REL]” (277). In doing so, they would strip sacred speech of the underlying essence Saint Paul assigns to it: “If I speak with the tongues of men, and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1, qtd. in *Inquiry* 277). Parlement’s public prosecutor seems to have seen a similar risk in mystery plays: the “staging of the mediations” was such an allure that it emptied out the churches, supplanted ritual observances, and dampened the spirit of giving. To make matters worse, the misfiring of the *feinte* in the Pentecost scene subjected divine epiphany and Church history to ridicule and may well have been exploited by Protestants anxious to cast doubt on Catholic dogma (Mazouer 57).

One should not, however, exaggerate the risks of religious category mistakes. Devotional fervor may arise from—and even depend on—the breakdown of conventional epistemological distinctions. The surviving corpus of mystery plays suggests that medieval religious drama was simultaneously evangelical and perverse, and pursued religious conversion through the transgression of what today’s readers may take as inviolable boundaries: sacred and profane, reverence and laughter, doctrinal purity and aesthetic indulgence. As for the medieval Mass, it was in many ways a spectacle, one that was imbued with theatrical techniques and that actively cultivated spectatorial forms of response (Dolan). The liturgy for feast days like Pentecost was especially stagy and included special effects like the lowering of an orb of fire or bits of burning flax through a hole in the roof in order to symbolize the Holy Spirit and the tongues of fire (Chambers 2: 66). We should not be too quick, then, to perceive religious category mistakes as the disruptive confusion of one mode for another; instead, we

should consider how disruption and confusion may be integral to faith itself. If, as Steven Justice argues, medieval belief systems required the “reactive intellectual energy” of doubt (13), would the conflation of [FIC], [TEC], and [REL] on the mystery stage not have reinvigorated spiritual commitments? Latour comes close to conceding something like this when he posits that “fear of committing a category mistake is what keeps the faithful in suspense” and distinguishes them from “sinners” and “infidels” (*Inquiry* 310). And yet as numerous scholars have shown, medieval religion was characterized as much by levity and play as fear and dread (Gurevich). Medieval Christians may therefore have fulfilled “the criterion of truth” for [REL] both by “trembl[ing] at the idea of being mistaken” (*Inquiry* 310) and by laughing at the mistakes themselves. Clearly, some of the faithful sought to deny this possibility, particularly the institutional elites anxious to pursue ideological and theological conformity in a period of tremendous instability. One wonders whether the purity they sought could be achieved, and whether the attempt itself risked conflating [REL] with the idolatrous beliefs that Latour calls Double Click [DC]: a “devil” or “Evil Genius” who “whisper[s] in your ear that it would surely be preferable to benefit from free, indisputable, and immediate access to pure, *untransformed* information” (*Inquiry* 93).

Indeed, as I will now illustrate with a case study, medieval religious drama resisted Double Click by staging encounters with opposition, reactivity, and dissonance—and did so in part by playing with fire. Mystery plays generally used pyrotechnic effects to enact on stage the validation of Catholic doctrine and the often-violent suppression of the Church’s enemies: pagans, heretics, apostates, and false prophets. And yet they also evince an openness to resistance and alterity: far from compelling faith and suppressing doubt through heuristic uses of illusion, mystery plays entertained spectators by means of metatheatrical representations that blurred the boundary between reality and fiction. Such representations evoked the possibility that miracles and sacraments might be difficult to distinguish from mere theatrics and outright fraud. The phenomenality of pyrotechnics contributed richly to this endeavor; for just as religious drama achieved its vitality “not simply by signifying the world but by being *of it*,” so its miracles and mysteries derived their energy from an inevitable motion of doubt that arose in response to religion’s translations of the otherworld.

Religious Category Mistakes: *Mistere as Faintise*

My case study is an unusually well-documented one: a 1496 production in the Burgundian city of Seurre of Andrieu de La Vigne’s *Mystère de saint Martin*, for which we have not only a full script featuring extensive stage directions but also a signed *procès-verbal* that furnishes a meticulous account of the commissioning

and staging of the play.³ The latter document mentions the engagement of a “maistre des secretz” (118) named Germain Jacquet, who was brought in from nearby Autun to engineer the special effects, many of which relied on smoke and flame to activate a dialectic of enchantment and disenchantment. That dialectic comes most vividly to light in the play’s numerous sacramental reenactments, which are minutely attentive to liturgical detail (the actors were instructed to observe the sacraments in church before they would be called on to perform them on stage), even as they blur the boundary between liturgy and artifice.

The word *mystère* itself points to the porousness of that boundary, in that it can signify an act of God, a miracle, a sacrament, or a hidden truth but also a representation or illusion, as in a mystery play or an act performed *par mystère*, “by means of theatrical artifice” (*Dictionnaire*, s.v. “mystère”). When Martin undergoes baptism in response to a divine command, the priest, worrying that his catechumen may lapse into impiety, exhorts him to obey God as a “bon catholique” (2027) and to guard against mistaking the sacrament for a sham: “Ne tenez pas ce mistere a faintise” (2020; “Don’t take this mystery for simulation/dissimulation/theater”). The inherent ambiguity of the priest’s language—and the mimetic context in which it is uttered—highlights the difficulty of distinguishing authentic practices from ludic ones. If sacramental reenactment is meant to promote spectators’ belief in ritual efficacy, it must be taken both as “mistere” (an orthodox liturgy properly performed) and as “faintise” (a theatrical simulation used to illustrate the nature and effects of baptism for the audience). For that matter, if the “mistere” were not “faintise,” the staged ritual would amount to an illegitimate and even sinful act of rebaptism. The priest’s language thus perversely enacts the very confusion of truth and pretense, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, good and evil that it claims to obviate.

Similar problems of authenticity attend the scene of Martin’s ordination as Archbishop of Tours, a worldly office he has repeatedly refused in order to remain cloistered at the Abbey of Ligugé where he could be sheltered from worldly temptations. Ultimately, he is persuaded to leave the abbey thanks to a theatrical ruse performed by Le Rustault de Ville, an urban hick whose very name signals the paradoxical, confounding nature of theatrical personation—the fact that an actor must simultaneously inhabit two distinct identities, or in this instance three. Appearing at the abbey gate, Le Rustault presents himself as a distraught husband seeking spiritual consolation for his dying wife. When Martin hastens from his cell to tend to the woman’s needs, he finds himself surrounded by aldermen, who use the liturgy to bully him into accepting the archbishopric. As they drown out his protests with an ordination hymn, the cathedral dean proclaims,

De l'onction je vous conferme
 En ce mistere seulement,

 Aussi du tressaint, sacré cresseme
 Dont chascun est oinct au baptesme
 Pour vaincre du deable les tours,
 Affin que soyez tousjours ferme
 Et vray arcevesque de Tours. (6664–65, 6669–70)

I confirm you in this mystery only—and also anoint you with the most holy, sacred chrism with which everyone is anointed at baptism to vanquish the devil's tricks [*tours*]
 —so that you may always be the steadfast and true archbishop of Tours.

As in the baptismal scene, the language and conduct of the liturgy manifest both an instantiation and a vitiation of its performative effects. The audience is given to understand that the “mistere” has been felicitously performed by a real dean and is all that is needed to enact ordination. At the same time, however, the phrase “en ce mistere seulement” suggests that the performative succeeds only insofar as it is simulated by an actor within a play, and only because Le Rustault and the citizens of Tours have, like the devil himself, resorted to theatrical “tours” in order to compel Martin's vocation. This point is given emphasis by the saint's subsequent demonic confrontations, which demonstrate how easily religion can be appropriated and perverted through performance. When Satan appears to Martin disguised as Christ the King, aping God's own rhetorical style, and claiming to offer the saint unmediated access to “la divine essence” (9501), Martin sees through the theatrical ruse. It is not clear how he does so, however, or how a less saintly person might avoid the devil's snare. Certainly, Satan's skills as an actor suggest how difficult it would be for the average layperson to distinguish between diabolical “faintise” and sacred “mistere,” between an illusion [FIC] that condemns the deceived to perdition by reducing the divine essence [REL] to “pure, *untransformed* information” and an illusion that enhances religious devotion by means of heuristic fictions that not only cross [FIC] and [REL] but suggest that only a saint could keep them from being amalgamated.

It is more or less inevitable that dilemmas such as these should lead to the Eucharist, the sacrament in which appearance and reality are most crucially at stake, and most strikingly at odds. Indeed, this is where the *Mystère de saint Martin* ends up and where it makes its most spectacular use of pyrotechnics. Toward the end of his life, the saint declares to his acolytes his intention to perform “une messe auctentique” (7842), which we can take to mean an authen-

tic or efficacious Mass, or one that is performed with all due ceremony (*Dictionnaire*, s.v. “authentique”). The stage directions provide precise indications as to how authenticity is to be constructed and how the audience’s perceptions of it are to be managed using visual signs:

Icy doibt avoir ung aultel bien acoustré de toutes choses, auquel saint Martin viendra pour chanter messe. Lors on le revestira et fera on ne plus ne moins qu’a ung arcevesque. Il pourra dire la messe toute, mais il ne consacrera point. Puis quant se viendra a la levacion du corps de Dieu jusques a la poitrine seulement, il doibt venir dessus son chief ung tourbillon de feu subtillement fait sans toucher a sa teste et y demeurer une petite espace de temps, radiant et esclairant, puis s’en aller et perdre par subtil moyen. Et saint Martin qui fait semblant de ne le voir point, achevera le residu de sa messe. (473)

Here, there should be an altar furnished with all the things necessary, and Saint Martin will approach it to say Mass. Then [his acolytes] will change his clothes and do for him no more and no less than they would for an archbishop. He will be able to say the entire Mass, but he will not consecrate. Then when it comes to the elevation, he will raise the body of God to the chest only, and a whirling flame, subtly crafted, should appear above his head without touching it and should remain there for a short span of time, radiating and illuminating, then should go away and disappear by subtle means. And Saint Martin, who pretends not to see it, will complete the remainder of his Mass.

Twice invoking *subtilité*, meaning finesse and ingenuity but also ruse (*Dictionnaire*, s.v. “subtilité”), La Vigne calls on Maistre Jacquet to use tricks of verisimilitude to suggest the truth of the doctrine of the Real Presence and to recall the fiery visitation of the Holy Spirit to the apostles at Pentecost. To ensure the audience receives these messages (which, like the *feinte*, had the potential to misfire), La Vigne has the archangel Gabriel appear to Martin immediately following the Mass to inform the saint of what he could not see for himself: “Le Saint Esprit tresdigne, precieux, / En espee de feu t’est venu voir / Ainsi qu’il vint ses appostres revoir” (7859–61; “The Holy Spirit, most worthy and precious, came to see you in the form of fire, just as he reappeared to his apostles”).

Yet even as the spectacle manifests and announces the sacrament’s mysterious efficacy and the saint’s apostolic virtue, it simultaneously indicates that this “messe” is not “auctentique” and must not be mistaken for such if the sanctity of the Eucharist and the sacerdotal privileges of the clergy are to be preserved. Indeed, the Mass scene (like Crab’s performance in *Two Gentlemen*) must be

viewed through at least two lenses simultaneously. On the one hand, the audience is asked to believe provisionally that Martin effects the ritual transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, who is as fully present on the altar as he was to his apostles at Pentecost [REL]. On the other hand, they are asked to perceive in the actor's failure to elevate the host, and thereby perform the consecration, a visual reminder that the wafer has not become "le corps de Dieu" but remains a piece of bread and a theatrical prop [TEC•FIC]; that "saint Martin" is neither saint nor archbishop but an actor "qui fait semblant" [FIC•REL]; and that the orb of fire is not "le Saint Esprit" but a clever device used to simulate it [TEC•REL], a device that could easily misfire, giving rise to category mistakes. If the risk of misfire is inescapable, it is nonetheless theatrically and theologically necessary. Without it, the simulated miracle would be utterly mundane and therefore unmiraculous. Worse still, if the audience were to take it for a real miracle rather than a *feinte* subject to failure, they would read the scene through the first lens only, causing the simulated Mass to slide into idolatry and false religion: the worship of bread, the deification of technology, and the heretical belief that the Divine Presence can be accessed without sacerdotal intervention as "pure, *untransformed* information."

La Vigne was clearly apprehensive about these possibilities, as he sought to guard against them by manipulating the gestural semiotics of the Eucharistic service. According to Miri Rubin, the liturgy of the pre-Tridentine Mass included stipulations for avoiding "the difficulties and potential abuses of ritual practice" (94). Specifically, priests were instructed "not to elevate the host before 'hoc est corpus meum' since it was not yet Christ's body" (95). Drawing on this tradition, La Vigne instructs the actor playing Saint Martin to raise the host "jusques a la poitrine seulement." The fact that he never raises it above his head reminds the audience that they are not witnessing an authentic ritual, that no change of substance has occurred, and that they must not worship the host, for danger of idolatry. Even as La Vigne bows to such concerns, however, he uses words, gestures, and all the "subtils moyens" at his disposal to cultivate aesthetic immersion and to convince spectators that they are witnessing not only the transubstantiation of bread and wine but also a Eucharistic, theophanic miracle. Thus, in the Mass scene, as in the play as a whole, the commitment that sustains belief arises from its most vulnerable claims: the yoking of invisible, incorporeal, transcendental truths to visible, corporeal, factitious ones while simultaneously relying on and discrediting sensory perception. Even as Martin's "messe auctentique" cultivates belief in the Church's sacramental promises, it points insistently to the cognitive dissonance inherent in Eucharistic devotion and theatrical representation, both of which are predicated on the simultaneous embrace and denial of empirical evidence.

La Vigne is clearly uneasy with the possibility that spectators might overlook or seek to attenuate such dissonance, and he uses the scene of Martin's last rites to establish that true belief and make-believe, *mistère* and *faintise*, [REL] and [FIC], must remain permanently entangled. As with the previous sacramental scenes, the stage directions insist here on a scrupulous reconstruction of the liturgy, even as they twice clarify that the "hostie" has not been "sacree" and is therefore not what it purports to be: "le Corpus Christi" (565, 566). Since the actors cannot signal the wafer's status using gestures (within the theatrical fiction, it would have been consecrated on an altar, then carried in a pyx to the dying man's bedside), La Vigne has them break the illusion with an *ad spectatores* speech. Le Messaigier du Jeu, an emcee who is otherwise responsible only for announcing the start and end of performance segments, gestures to the priest administering the host and declares,

Messieurs, pour le vray vous produyre,
 Ce qui est de ses mains tenu,
 Ainsi que voyez nu a nu,
 Pour debouter ydolatrie,
 Quoy qu'en honneur soit maintenu,
 Le corps Jhesucrist n'y est mye.
 Pour tant, mon amy et m'amy,
 Ne vous bougez, faictes scilence;
 Ce n'est, affin qu'on le vous dye,
 Que du sacrement la semblance. (10037–46)

Gentlemen, let me present you with the truth: that which he holds in his hands, as you can see quite nakedly, to prevent idolatry, and even though it is being treated with honor, the body of Jesus Christ is not there at all. My dear friends, gentlemen and ladies, don't move, keep silent for this reason: we must inform you that this is only the semblance of the sacrament.

This speech attempts to distinguish the phenomenal reality of the performance [REP] from its mimetic field [FIC] and to ensure the purity of "le corps Jhesucrist" [REL] despite category crossings. The gesture is necessitated by the fact that in theater props are usually interchangeable with the things they signify, while in Holy Communion the visible attributes of the wafer remain materially unchanged even as the substance transforms into Christ himself. Le Messaigier must therefore explain that the host in this case is bread that has been depicted as a consecrated wafer for aesthetic purposes rather than bread that has been converted, in essence if not in accidents, into Jesus's own flesh.

At the same time, however, the speech exacerbates the theological problems

it claims to resolve by calling to mind the doubts that plagued the contemporary cult of the Eucharist and by suggesting the inextricability of “sacrement” and “semblance” in that cult. The wafer must be conditionally accepted as a true “sacrement” (if the play is to illustrate ritual efficacy) but must also be recognized as fictional (if the audience is once again to avoid the threat of “ydolatrie”). More than illuminating this paradox, however, *Le Messaigier* gets mired in it, pointing to the ways in which category crossings threaten to slip into category mistakes. He urges spectators to behold the “naked” reality that the host is merely bread and not to believe naively in the theatrical pretense of Eucharistic adoration (“honneur”). Yet this means they must verify the truth about a simulated communion ritual by trusting the very faculty of vision that proves so unreliable in the case of an actual communion ritual. Simply put, the Eucharist, whether mimetic or transubstantiated, does not merely survive being refuted by the evidence of the senses here but is constituted by that refutation. And in this respect, the *mistère* of the Mass is utterly bound to theatrical *faintise*: it acquires its meaning and achieves its effects by calling on beholders to both believe and disbelieve what they see, to make themselves wrong so that they may avoid the temptations of Double Click and renew their faith in a ritualized truth that is fundamentally in conflict with their experience. La Vigne’s play thus shows us that late medieval Catholics did not distinguish “the pleasure procured by the staging of the mediations” from the “itinerary of the spirit of conversion.” (I am not convinced that contemporary Lutherans do either, or that it would enhance their faith if they did.) On the contrary, with its twisted logic and conspicuous aporias, *Le Messaigier*’s speech suggests an active effort to distort or disrupt the sacraments, to cross and conflate [FIC] and [TEC] with [REL] and [REP], and to use binocular vision to remind the audience that they must remain critically and even skeptically engaged with the sacred events, rituals, and mysteries re-enacted for them.

Given their “exceptional degree of self-givenness,” pyrotechnic *feintes* offer an especially useful device for spurring such engagement and for warding off the spiritual quiescence Latour associates with those “sinners” and “infidels” who have no “fear of committing a category mistake.” With its potential to spread and destroy (or, alternatively, to fizzle and fail), fire was perhaps always disquieting on the medieval stage, and for multiple reasons—aesthetic, theological, political, and physical. The bodily risks were made painfully evident to the Seurois in 1496, in that the actor playing Satan was scorched by simulated hellfire as he made his first entrance onto the stage. The *procès-verbal* reports,

Ainsi qu’il volut sortir de son secret par dessoubz terre, le feu se prist a son habit autour des fesses, tellement qu’il fut fort brulé. Mais il fut si soub-

daynement secouru, devestu et rabillé que, sans faire semblant de rien, [il] vint jouer son parsonnage, puis se retira en sa [m]aison. De ceste chose furent moult fort espoventez lesditz joueurs, car ilz pensoyent que, puisque au commencement inconvenient les assailloit, que la fin s'en ensuivroit. Tou-teffois, moyenant l'ayde de Mondit seigneur saint Martin qui prist la conduyte de la matiere en ses mains, les choses allerent trop mieulx cent foys que l'on ne pensoit. . . . Et puis, a l'issue du parc, lesditz joue[u]rs se misrent en ordre, . . . en venant jusques a ladite eglise Monseigneur saint Martin dire et chanter devostement, en rendant graces a Dieu, ung SALVE REGINA. (120–21)

As he prepared to emerge from his trapdoor underground, his costume caught fire around the buttocks, such that he was badly burned. But he was so swiftly aided, stripped, and reclothed that, without showing that anything was wrong, he came to play his part, then retired to his house. The other players were greatly dismayed by this event, for they thought that since misfortune had struck at the beginning, they would be similarly afflicted until the end. However, with help from my lord Saint Martin, who took matters into his own hands, things went one hundred times better than anyone expected. And then [later, after that day's performance had ended], the actors exited the playing area, prepared themselves [for worship], and headed to the church of my lord Saint Martin. There, they devoutly spoke and sang a SALVE REGINA while giving thanks to God.

As with the Berruyer production of *Actes*, we see once again the disruptive and even terrifying power of a misfired *feinte*. For the actor playing Satan, the burns on his buttocks must have stood as a painful reminder that a failure of [TEC] could not only interrupt [FIC] but could also inflict simulated agonies on real bodies [REP]. And for the company as a whole, the mishap must have awakened fears that [TEC] might demystify both [FIC] and [REL], allowing spectators to imagine that the punishing fires of hell were nothing more than a *feinte* designed to delude and beguile them—a bungled special effect animated by mundane, natural forces that had little regard for either humanity or divinity.

Clearly, something needed to be done to preserve theatrical “semblant” and sacred “matiere”; and indeed, the actors, admirably true to their calling, instantly set about repairing category crossings and fending off category mistakes. In doing so, however, they revealed the extent to which those mistakes could have salutary effects, fanning the flames of religious ardor and restoring faith in the redemptive, reparative power of prayer. If the company initially gave in to superstition by viewing the incident as an omen or prognostic of future failures, they soon recommitted themselves to their flaming spectacle and to the worship

of a saint whom they believed capable of suturing *mistere* and *faintise* back together again. Tellingly, though, they did not seek to conceal completely the danger of demystification inherent in the misfired *feinte*. On the contrary, the *procès-verbal* reports that Satan seized the opportunity to signal that danger when he returned to the stage that afternoon. Addressing Lucifer but also, implicitly, the audience, he improvised lines that directly referred to his injury: “Pour a mal faire t’enorter: / Je me suis tout bruslé le cu” (121; “To inspire you to do evil, I burned my own ass off”). In order to nurture belief—both in the devil at this moment, as well as in Christ and his saints in the *mystère* as a whole—the actors did not simply cross [FIC] and [TEC] with [REL] and [REP]; they also made a spectacle of, and found opportunities for collective devotion in, an “upsurge of the real” that collapsed the one into the other.

Conclusion

What does the *Mystère de saint Martin* reveal to us, then, about the modes of existence as perceived by audiences of medieval religious drama? As we have seen, mystery plays allowed ample room for the diplomatic, if not always fully harmonious, negotiation of multiple modes. They also used the unpredictable operations of self-given realities like open flame to confront spectators with the precarious status of live theater and Christian faith, both of which required category crossings but could not prevent category mistakes. Despite being anthropogenic and anthropomorphic—as are all “technologies” and “works of art” for Latour (*Inquiry* 246)—the medieval stage could not subdue or transcend the world in the name of humanity or an incarnate God. Instead, it incorporated, and was subject to, worldly forces that defied human intentionality and enacted their own agentive claims. Those forces threatened at any moment to distort sacred histories and orthodox beliefs; to reveal that [REL] coexisted and assembled with, rather than subordinating, the other modes; and to inflict significant damage on the bodies of those who strived to enact and believe in such subordination. Perhaps most crucially, mystery plays exposed Christianity as a religion of immanence that requires the divinity to inhabit and yet transcend the world. Satan’s badly burned buttocks stand as evidence that those forces could in fact have an agenda of their own and could only be brought back into line by the most willful and insistent expressions of religious commitment: “dire et chanter devostement, en rendant graces a Dieu, ung SALVE REGINA.”

Medieval religious drama is thus far more attuned to the agency of the non-human than its incarnational aesthetic would suggest. It exploits both category crossings and category mistakes in order to reveal that Christianity is in danger of dissolution by the very modes of existence through which it is translated, and that religious belief is at once subverted and constituted by that danger. As La-

tour would have it, “the appearance of [religious] beings depends on an *interpretation* so delicate that one lives constantly at risk and in fear of lying about them; and, in lying, *mistaking them for another*—for a demon, a sensory illusion, an emotion, a foundation” (*Inquiry* 310). I would add that sometimes mistakes (misfired *feintes*, for instance) and lies (one way of translating *faintise*) were needed to trigger the persistent, irreconcilable doubts that were utterly entangled with, and worked to sustain, late medieval Christian beliefs. Among these doubts was the apprehension that Eucharistic ritual and theater might reduce God to the brute reality of a thing or might reveal him to be, not the Incarnate Spirit, but some sort of collective make-believe.

In closing, I wish to return to States’s notion of binocular vision, which views “semiotics and phenomenology . . . as complementary perspectives on the world and on art” (8), and to posit (pace Latour) a similar complementarity—perhaps even a diplomatic rapprochement—between phenomenology and the metaphysical turn. Latour’s basic critique of Husserl and Heidegger has recently been echoed by Graham Harman: “Husserl limits himself to a description of phenomena present to human consciousness, and hence remains an idealist despite his call for a return to the things themselves. . . . [And] as for Heidegger, though he never reduces entities to their presence in consciousness, he still belittles specific objects as merely ‘ontic’ and draws the conclusion that ontology is commanded to deal with being itself and not specific entities” (100). And yet, as Harman himself argues, phenomenology nonetheless “harbors resources that lead it to converge with Latour’s insights, however different their starting points may be” (100). One such convergence is the definition of “reality as *resistance*” (Harman 26), which is a fundamental thesis not only for Latour but also for Scheler and States. If States focuses exclusively on the way theatrical representations appear to human observers (and thereby confirms the phenomenologist’s anthropocentric bias), he also insists that theater derives vitality from non-human realities and that the meanings we assign to those realities do not precede them but are obliged to “trail them” instead, “like the tails of comets” (23). States may consequently have been willing to concede the claims Harman attributes to Latour, namely that “non-human actors do as much ontological work as people do” (101) and that philosophy must wrestle with the “puzzling difficulty” of “the relations between objects” without allowing those relations to be “monopolized by some privileged tyrant entity, whether human or divine” (102). With its binocular vision and paradoxical faith, the *Mystère de saint Martin* suggests that medieval people themselves accepted some version of this claim. For while they believed fervidly in the privileged power of the saint and his God to take “la matiere en ses mains,” they also understood that their incarnational and sacramental faith required that God himself become “matiere,” that he allow him-

self to be conjured on an altar by a priest and be “de ses mains tenu,” and that he risk, therefore, appearing to be a fiction or a lie—a *semblance* or *faintise* created by those who venerate him as the Creator.

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NOTES

1. Although the theatrical productions I discuss in this essay postdate most of the usual *termini ad quem* for the Middle Ages, they nonetheless evince deep continuities with earlier theatrical traditions and wide disparities from later ones (Runnalls). In my view, they can, and should, be considered medieval.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, translations throughout are mine.
3. Parenthetical citations refer either to page numbers (for stage directions and the *procès-verbal*) or to line numbers (for speech).

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