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European Medieval Drama

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Performance-based Research
in the Medieval Convent[1]

Olivia Robinson

Writing of fifteenth-century French verse, both narrative and lyric, Adrian Armstrong powerfully underlines its 'epistemic value and [...] qualities'.[2] In so doing, he builds on the idea that late medieval poetic technique is a body of knowledge acquired through—for example—manuals of versification, to consider the ways in which poetic knowledge is also acquired and accrued through producing—*doing*—verse. Practice, he suggests, can be central to generating and sharing poetic knowledge: that is, both knowledge about poetry, and the particular kinds of knowledge which poetry can itself convey. Armstrong uncovers this with particular clarity when discussing the mid-fifteenth century poetry of Charles d'Orléans and the coterie of fellow-poets which surrounded him at Blois. His analysis of their work reveals a group of individuals for whom

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Abstract: This article begins with Adrian Armstrong's discussion of the coterie poetry composed by Charles d'Orléans and his associates at Blois to explore the 'epistemic value and qualities' not of communal poetry but rather of communal *theatre* within a quite different social group: a convent of Carmelite nuns in late-fifteenth-century Burgundy. In it I suggest that some of the ways in which Armstrong conceptualises the processes by which lyric poetry was explored and produced at Blois may be fruitfully brought to bear on thinking about the epistemological implications and consequences of 'making' theatre (in the sense of composing *and* performing it) within this medieval women's religious house.

Keywords: communal theatre, fifteenth century, Burgundy, Eucharist, practice based research, Carmelite nuns, Nativity play, *Pèlerinage de vie humaine*

doing poetry develops poetic knowledge, both at an individual and a communal level, and leads to a shared development of technical, poetic skill.

Several of the metaphors which Armstrong develops to give shape to the epistemic processes which he sees at work in the poetry of Charles and his coterie draw, intriguingly, on the field of contemporary academic research and its dissemination: so, he describes Charles's court as 'a laboratory', where poets undertake 'collectively-fuelled experimentation', investigating '"research questions" [...] through a methodology of compositional practice'.[3] Later, he develops the research-based analogy further, likening the group of poets to an academic 'colloquium' and the manuscript which preserves the body of their work to 'a volume of conference proceedings', which brings together the efforts of 'a collegial enterprise ... adding to the sum of knowledge'.[4] Through use of this discourse, Armstrong posits implicitly that there are powerful resonances between the academic research activities which we, today, undertake, and the medieval literary (and other artistic) practices and processes which usually form the object of that research. We habitually conceive of research as a contemporary process: something which occurs in our own present time and space, and thus a process which is separate from the lives and experiences of the medieval individuals whose literary or artistic work we seek to understand or to interpret. These individuals, then, remain divorced, or at a remove, from the contemporary methodologies of our investigative work. Yet Armstrong's discussion of Charles d'Orléans and his coterie of fellow-poets poses a question about the habitual separation of academic research processes from their object(s): it useful for us to consider medieval artists *themselves* as researchers? Might we think of them as, like us, people adding to the sum total of knowledge about their discipline(s) through collaborative experimentation and active practice—rather than the ultimately often static or fixed objects of our own research activity?

These questions have recently become particularly resonant for me due to my own involvement in contemporary practice-based research into theatre in medieval women's religious houses. The Medieval Convent Drama project[5] aims to explore evidence for theatrical activity—ranging from full play-scripts

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[3] Armstrong, *The Virtuoso Circle*, pp. 77, 115.

[4] Armstrong, *The Virtuoso Circle*, p. 116. The Blois coterie's poetry was collected in Charles d'Orléans' so-called 'personal manuscript', now Paris, BnF, MS fr. 25458: see *The Poetry of Charles d'Orléans*, ed. by Arn and Fox, and *Le Livre d'amis*, ed. by Minet-Mahy and Mühlethaler.

[5] http://medievalconventdrama.org [accessed 28.08.2017].

to indications that performance took place—within female religious communities in England, northern France and Burgundy. Part of our work focuses on re-examining evidence which was already known to exist, but has been critically side-lined,[6] and part on uncovering new data and developing new ways to approach the phenomenon of convent drama. One of our research techniques will be performance-based: we will be taking some of the surviving convent plays upon which we are working into contemporary spaces—both within present-day nunneries and within the secular world—in and around the Swiss city of Fribourg, where we are based, performing with all-female casts to mixed audiences. We plan to assess the results of these performances, in terms of their emotional and devotional impacts on their spectators and performers, and their dramatic suitability for certain spaces, places, audiences and times. Contemporary performances—and the collection and analysis of reactions to those performances—will, therefore, be crucial in providing some of the data for our own team's research into the theatrical, devotional and liturgical dynamics of these plays. Considering the ways in which the sisters who created these plays may *themselves* have been undertaking a form of performance-based research repositions them as, in a sense, our co-researchers, aligning our research activity with theirs, and underscoring the powerful potential for epistemic questioning and exploration within theatrical practice, both then *and* now. It encourages us to see the plays not as finished products, to be simply 'recreated' in a contemporary time and space, or as straightforward conduits to their authors' (fixed) attitudes or conclusions. Rather, it prompts us to conceive of the plays as happenings which may *themselves* have wrought changes in their performers' approaches to their content each time they were played.

The Huy Carmelites and their Playbook

The Carmelite women's house in the town of Huy (now Belgium) was established in 1466, following the sack of Dinant, and the consequent flight of the house which had been founded there in 1455.[7] We know that the Huy convent undertook theatre, because a late fifteenth-century play-book, partially

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[6] For the historical absence of consideration of convent drama within scholarship on medieval theatre, see Matthews, 'Textual Spaces/Playing Spaces'. For the more general lack of integration of scholarship on medieval women's theatrical activities into mainstream discussion, see esp. Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama*; Normington, 'Faming of the Shrews'; Stokes, 'Women and Performance'.

[7] I base this account on Staring, 'The Carmelite Sisters'.

copied and signed by one of its members, sister Katherine Bourlet, survives as Chantilly, Musée Condé MS 617.[8] Despite the evident dissimilarities in location, social class and income, occupation, routine and (mostly) gender between Armstrong's group of poets at Blois and the Carmelite nuns of Huy who produced the book of plays I will discuss in this article, Armstrong's approach to Charles d'Orléans and his coterie resonates with the evidence of theatrical practice which survives from this convent.[9] Like Charles and his contemporaries, the sisters who created the play-book which is now Chantilly, Musée Condé MS 617 formed a close group of interrelated people from a range of backgrounds, located in a particular social and geographic place. They, too, had major interests and daily foci in common: life in a Carmelite religious house was in part structured around communal activities, whether that were singing the office or set periods of recreational interaction. Like Charles and his associates, these nuns experimented with the ways in which joint endeavour and community creative undertaking help to further greater and more complex communal understanding of particular epistemic questions. Both groups also share a commitment to *performance* of their own creative compositions, performance which served to knit their particular community together in a shared and commonly-understood practice.[10]

Could these Carmelite sisters, too, be conceptualised as a kind of fifteenth-century 'researchers'? Instead of thinking solely about performance-based

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[8] Gustave Cohen first identified Sister Katherine Bourlet within the convent's surviving archival documents, and established the play-book's provenance: see *Mystères et Moralités*, ed. by Cohen, pp. xcviii–c. Sister Katherine appears in the records in 1478. Another, later signature on the manuscript has also been identified as a Huy nun: Sister Eliys de Potiers signed its final folio, and is recorded in the convent's Obituary as having died in 1612.

[9] '*Mostly* gender' because, although the vast majority of the named poets at Blois are male, Charles' wife Marie's verse is included in the manuscript which preserves the community's poetry. Furthermore, many poems are unattributed in this manuscript, leaving open at least the possibility that others might also be female-authored.

[10] There are indications in Charles' manuscript that performative reading aloud (rather than silent, individual reading) was a core part of the group's socio-poetic practice. Mühlethaler and Minet-Mahy, for example, discuss the case of *rondeau* no. 387, Charles' tongue-in-cheek advice about marriage addressed to his newly-wed friend Fredet, in which a stage direction is given in the manuscript's margin to '.ii. foiz toussir' ('cough twice') at a certain point in a particular line; a space has been left in the syllable count of the line to accommodate the cough. See *Le Livre d'amis*, ed. by Minet-Mahy and Mühlethaler, pp. 21–22 and p. 472 for *rondeau* 387. I survey and discuss the manuscript evidence for performance of the Biblical plays in Chantilly 617 in: Robinson, 'Chantilly', at, e.g., pp. 102, 110–11.

research as something my own research project will undertake in the twenty-first century using what remains of their theatre scripts (although this will remain a valuable source of research data), might we also seek to approach those scripts *themselves* as evidence of fifteenth-century collaborative research through performance? Might the plays from this convent be imagined as performance-based research into the sisters' own practices, beliefs, and ways of life? If so, how might using this framework change our approach to the playbook and its contents?

If Armstrong's group of poets at Blois were interested in furthering the intellectual and creative affordances of fixed-form lyric poetry, the plays produced by the Carmelite nuns who created Chantilly, MS 617 pose very different questions, which cluster around the 'epistemic value[s]' (to use Armstrong's term) of theatrical composition and performance. By these, I mean both: a) knowledge about the making of plays; and b) the particular kinds of knowledge that performance, specifically, can create and communicate. What kinds of knowledge could *doing* this theatre—as opposed to, say, thinking about the narratives it presents—open up? What embodied knowledge does practising theatre bring which is distinct from other methods of enquiry or investigation? And can we perceive or unpick the processes by which these kinds of knowledge are brought into being when we read the scripts in this surviving convent playbook?

a. Knowing about Plays

In the case of the first question here—knowing about the processes of making a play—examining parts of the playbook itself underscores the extent to which such knowledge is being acquired and put into practice in the course of the plays' development. Fig. 1 (Chantilly 617, fol. 2^v–3^r) shows the shepherds' scene from the sisters' Nativity Play, comprising their decision to set off and visit Jesus, their arrival, their adoration and their departure. I have discussed elsewhere the somewhat frenetic changes in hand which are visible here, and the ways in which tracing the interactions between these hands on the page suggests that the building of this scene took place as a collaborative process, and was not a *fait accompli*.[11] In the context of thinking about performance-based research in the Middle Ages, this section of the manuscript forms an example of a group of people working out—I believe, through practice—the best way

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[11] Robinson, 'Chantilly', pp. 98–100, 103–09.

Figure 1. Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS 617 fols 2ᵛ–3ʳ.
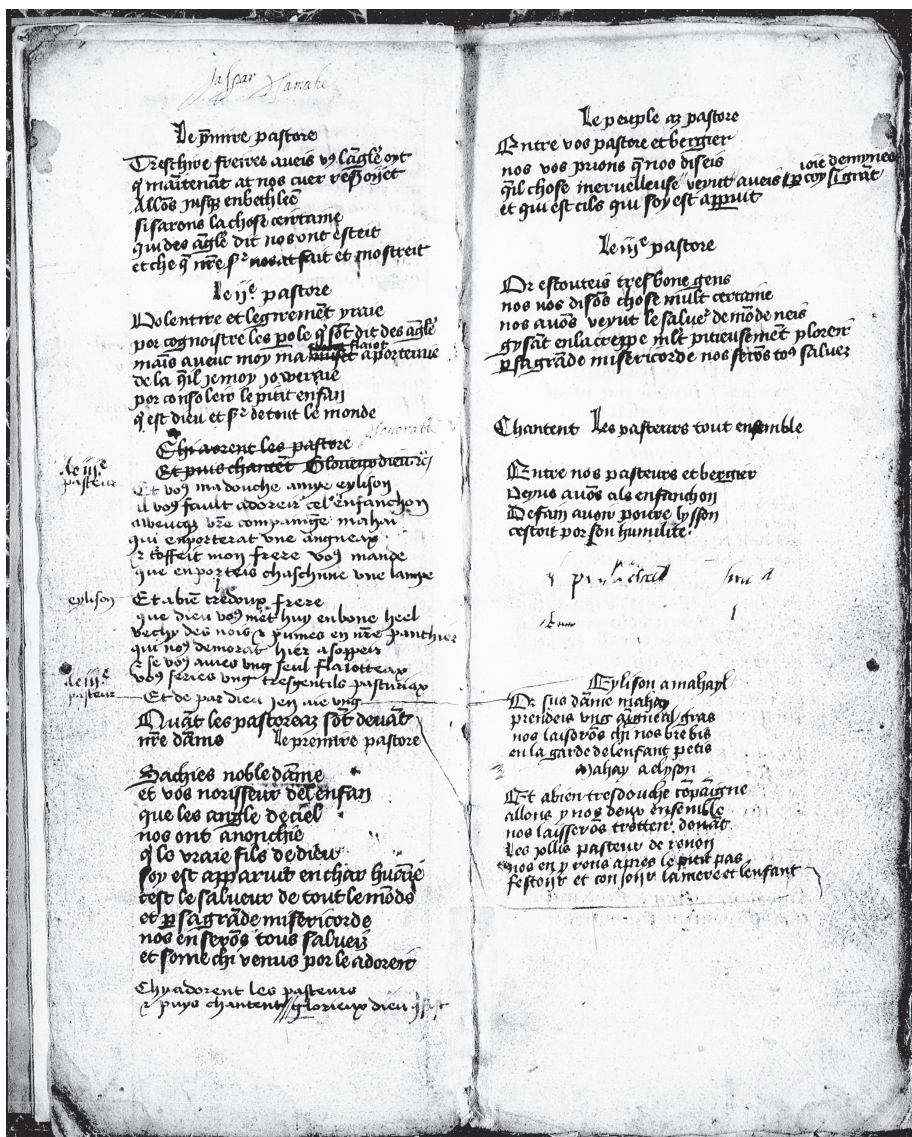Photo: CNRS-IHRT © Bibliothèque du Château de Chantilly.

to structure and coordinate gesture, movement through physical and narrative space and time, speeches, music (both sung and instrumental), silence and tableaux. Within this scene, the journey of the shepherds and shepherdesses to the manger is repeatedly restructured to take place in stages. This is signalled by

the incremental building of their dialogue, each addition bringing more details. These details sometimes incorporate stage directions for other actors and culminate in a visual tableau around the manger highlighted by the performance of a vernacular song, entitled via its incipit *Glorieux dieu qui fist* ('Glorious God who made ...'). The song's placement within the scene seems to have been rethought in the light of the progressive movements which need to take place from fields to stable, and which map onto a change in tone as the shepherds and shepherdesses approach the Holy Family, and thus draw nearer and nearer to the divine: it is crossed out early in the scene, and re-inserted (by a different hand to that which first copied it) at its culmination. A second song (beginning *Entre nos pasteurs et bergier*; 'Between us, shepherds ...') is employed to mark the end of a gradual process in which the shepherds' focus transitions away from the Holy Family, and towards the audience (who are, in this scene, probably implicated in the narrative action of the Nativity as 'le peuple', the people, and who interact with the shepherds). This song also marks the end of the scene, possibly providing an opportunity for choreographed movement through the playing space, in time to the music, as the shepherds return to their fields.

   Previously, I have considered the implications of this scene's construction from the perspective of gender—most obviously, the very unusual added presence of the two shepherdesses, who form *female* worshippers at the manger alongside the more traditional shepherds.[12] However, the scene's construction can equally be considered from an epistemic perspective. The kinds of interactions between individuals which could have given rise to a 'group script' like this, and the decisions which have to have been made about how to embody certain moments—how to convey certain emotions or certain realities, how to make certain things 'happen' on stage—inculcate theatrical skills. They develop knowledge about the effectiveness of particular performance-related, theatrical techniques; for example, the ways in which interactions between song, dialogue and silence, or movement and stillness within a given space can be deployed to create tone and register, or to communicate emotion.

b. Knowing through Playing

Moving to consider the second of my 'epistemic value[s]'—i.e. ways in which taking part in embodied, physical performance might have generated a specific kind of knowledge in its medieval performers, and understanding what

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[12] Robinson, 'Chantilly', pp. 111–12 and pp. 112–18 on other added female characters within the Biblical plays of Chantilly 617.

that might entail in terms of particular plays—is perhaps more difficult. John McGavin and Greg Walker have recently extensively explored the conditions and implications of medieval and early modern dramatic spectatorship, concluding that

> drama is [...] performed by actors who move in space and time, and are perceived in real time and space by audiences whose responses are themselves fundamentally grounded in the physicality of the moment. But theatre is also, simultaneously, an art of *minds* [...] actors and audiences sharing the same physical space and time might conspire together to create different mental and cultural spaces and different time frames.[13]

McGavin and Walker's work reveals the critical insights which attending to the input and diverse experiences (both bodily and cognitive) of medieval spectators can uncover, and explores several routes into understanding and gaining critical purchase on those experiences.[14] As they note, there are challenges to such an endeavour: it will 'inevitably be primarily speculative, but in the absence of copious documentary records of audience responses, speculation and the imagination are necessary analytical tools.'[15] Teasing out the potential physical experiences and processes of cognition of medieval *actors*, rather than spectators, is clearly equally challenging: nowhere do any of the sisters who created and owned Chantilly 617, for example, conveniently write down their reactions while participating in a performance of the plays, either as actors or as spectators. Yet imagining the 'epistemic value' of such experiences—particularly, for my purposes here, the potential value of the *performers*' experiences—is important if we are to uncover some of the affective and intellectual valences of the plays, or to uncover what Walker has termed their 'cultural work'.[16]

The findings of the recent *Experience of Worship* project, based at the University of Bangor, underlined the value of the experiential research outcomes which arose out of undertaking medieval liturgies in surviving medieval churches today.[17]

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[13] McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, p. 177.

[14] McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, chapters 1 and 2. For further stimulating discussion of the experiences and active input of spectating individuals and groups, see the essays in *Ceremonial Culture in Pre-Modern Europe*, ed. by Nicholas Howe, esp. chapter 1 and chapter 4.

[15] McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, p. 42, see also pp. 4–5.

[16] Walker, 'The Cultural Work', p. 76.

[17] http://www.experienceofworship.org.uk/project/introduction-and-overview/ [accessed 28.08.2017].

Embodied *doing*, the project's work suggests, can give a counterpoint or a different perspective to 'thinking about' when it comes to approaching medieval cultural phenomena—theatre, liturgy—which are bodily or sensory as well as spiritual or intellectual undertakings, and which are (and were) experienced bodily or physically in different ways by the range of their participants. This was probably no less true in the Middle Ages than it is today.

Considering part of an *exemplum* from a late fourteenth-century Middle English sermon may help to give more purchase on this idea from a medieval, rather than a contemporary perspective.[18] The sermon in question takes as its Biblical text a verse from Peter: 'Christus passus est pro nobis, vobis relinquens exemplum ut sequimani vestigia eius' ('Christ suffered for us, leaving you an example so that you may follow in his footsteps', 1 Peter 2. 21).[19] Christ's example of suffering teaches us, the sermon writer explains, that happiness does not come from worldly pleasures: these Christ rejected when He submitted to pain and death on the cross, and we should do likewise. The writer then illustrates this assertion with an *exemplum* involving the particular experience of embodying specific roles in a passion play. The passion play actors are discussing their next performance, and the actor who has just played Christ explains vehemently that he does not want to do so again:

> Ego eram Christus crucifixus, eram verberatus, eram derisus [...] esuriebam, sciciebam, et nemo michi dabat. Respexi inferius et vidi tortores et demones in multis solaciis, na[m] bene videbatur sibi qui eos facere poterat bibere vel comedere. Respexi ex parte dextra et vidi Petrum crucifixum; et respexi ex parte sinistra et vidi Andream crucifixum, sic quod omnia tediosa errant michi et apostolis, omnia solaciosa tortoribus et demonibus [...] si debeam iterum ludere, nec volo esse Christus nec apostolus set tortor vel demon.

> (I was Christ and was crucified, beaten, mocked, I was hungry and thirsty and nobody gave me anything. I looked down below and saw tormentors and demons in great joy. For he who could make them eat and drink was well pleased. I looked to the right and saw Peter on the cross and I looked to the left and saw Andrew on the cross so that for me and my apostles everything was pain, but for our tormen-

[18] Clearly, sermon *exempla* do not have to be strictly true to life, in the sense that sermons are carefully constructed texts, and the happenings they describe as *exempla* may, therefore, not have actually occurred. However, insofar as an *exemplum* needs to be credible to its audience, its action, although it might be imaginary, must surely have been designed to appear plausible to those listening.

[19] The sermon is partially edited, translated and discussed by Wenzel: '*Somer game*'. Here and elsewhere I use Wenzel's translation.

tors and the demons everything was comfort. If I must play again, I do not want to be Christ nor an apostle, but a tormentor or a demon).[20]

Obviously, from the sermon-writer's perspective, the moral of this story is that the Christ-actor is sadly mistaken: using the play as an analogy for life, it is better to suffer during this life, as Christ did, than to seek bodily fulfilment in food, drink and enjoyment. However, this moment in the sermon is perhaps less interesting for the moral that the writer interpretatively draws from it than for the possible glimpse it gives—imagined or otherwise—of the physical experience of performing: the bodily knowledge which was inculcated in the performer by undergoing a form of crucifixion for the length of the play, and which led to a fervent desire not to undergo that painful process again. The scorning, the beating, the hunger and the thirst, the envy while watching other actors able to eat, drink and move were all parts of the Christ-actor's physical experiences of acute discomfort as he embodied the role—as well, of course, as being part of Christ's own foundational experiences when *He* was on the cross. The actor's own sensations and bodily impulses were not suppressed for the duration of the play, while he 'became' Christ; rather, they were inevitably stimulated and engaged by the process of performance, and they remained with him after the end of that performance.

In a sense, we might say that performance was an experience which allowed the performer's body to experience, or 'live' the effects of typology, to put typology into physical, lived action. Later in the sermon, after the *exemplum* has been discussed, the writer returns to medieval theatrical practice as a source of imagery, implicitly using the metaphor of a theatrical part to figure the typological and soteriological resonances of Christ's crucifixion through time and across space:

> Christus docuit **modum istius ludi** in verbo [et] … docuit facto quomodo **postea luderunt** ips[i], quando fuit captus, *forsakyn, bondyn, and betyn* et tunc nudus positus super crucem.

> (Christ taught the **manner of this play** in words [and]… he taught by his very action how his followers **would later on play**, as he was captured, forsaken, bound and beaten and then put naked on the cross).[21]

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[20] Wenzel, '*Somer game*', pp. 278, 280.

[21] Wenzel, '*Somer game*', pp. 278, 280, my emphasis. Wenzel draws attention to the sermon's deployment of code-switching between Middle English and Latin for rhetorical effect, p. 276.

What the sermon writer terms 'ludere *pagyn* Christi' (playing the pageant of Christ)[22] is what the apostles and martyred saints will do, and what we must, after them and after Christ Himself, strive to do in our own lives. What is interesting about this in relation to the sermon's *exemplum* which we considered above is that in the play there described, Christ was described crucified *alongside* his apostles Peter and Andrew. Typology is being embodied in two ways here: firstly, time is collapsed in the space of performance so that the apostles die next to Christ: to employ the sermon-writer's 'theatrical part' metaphor, the playing out of His script and theirs is merged into one moment. Secondly, Christ's foundational 'script', reiterated by the apostles, is also being reiterated in 'real', present time and place within the bodies and the *physical* experiences of the crucified actors, who are thus taking their typological place within the line of individuals who imitate Christ's actions, who 'play His pageant'. The latter in particular is knowledge which being in the performance—*doing* the performance—opens up.

Le jeu de pelerinage humaine

Returning to Chantilly 617, the Carmelite playbook, the last of its plays provides particularly apposite material for thinking further about the possible knowledge which performing can inculcate. This play takes the form of a theatrical adaptation of part of a pre-existent *narrative* poem. Exploring its particular dynamics, therefore, underscores particularly heavily what embodiment might bring, as a method of inquiry, learning or understanding, that is different from other methods, such as (for example) reading. The final play in Chantilly 617 is entitled the *Jeu de pelerinage humaine* or 'the play of the human pilgrimage', and it is drawn from a small section of Guillaume de Deguilleville's considerably larger allegorical verse narrative, *Le Pèlerinage de vie humaine*.[23] This poem takes the form of a vast dream-vision journey, in which the reader sees and encounters, through the eyes of a male dreamer-pilgrim-narrator, a variety

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[22] Wenzel, '*Somer game*', pp. 279, 280.

[23] As the play's most recent editors point out, its earliest editor adopted a parallel-text presentation which underlined the closeness of the play to its poetic source, playing down the differences between the texts: *Le Jeu de pelerinage humaine*, ed. by Bouhaïk-Gironès, Doudet, and Hindley, p. 589, n. 1. Here, I want to consider not just the textual reshaping which has taken place between poem and play (as Doudet et al. argue is necessary), but also the potential implications of physically performing the resultant play-script. For the play's first edition, see *Mystères et Moralités*, ed. by Cohen.

of characters and personified concepts in verbal interaction with one another, and with him.[24] The convent play reworks a short section of the *Pèlerinage* from first-person *narrated* dialogue and action into embodied theatre.[25] It removes the narrating voice of the dreamer-pilgrim (although it retains the Pilgrim as a speaking character where he is in dialogue with other characters). It constructs a sequence of speeches from the poem, whose interlocutors are now experienced 'live', as it were, rather than filtered through the narrative voice of the dreamer-pilgrim-narrator. The play opens—apparently rather startlingly—*medias in res*, as the Pilgrim addresses 'dame Rayson' (Lady Reason):

> Dame, qu'esce qu'aveis
> Que si tourbleie me sembleis?
> Por Dieu vus priie que ensengnier
> Me veulhiés de ce maingier.

(Lady, what is wrong with you? Why do you appear so troubled? In God's name, I beg you that you might be willing to teach me about this meal).[26]

'Ce maingier' is a deictic expression (*this* meal) which obviously requires some kind of referent. The meal in question is in fact a celebration of the Eucharist which, within the narrative of the *Pèlerinage*, the Pilgrim has just witnessed (and narrated) in the abode of Grace Dieu (the Grace of God). It is here performed by a figure first described by the Pilgrim as 'un maistre | Qui vicaire sembloit estre | D'Aarom ou de Moysi' (*Vie 1*, vv. 511–13; 'a master who seemed to be the vicar representing Aaron or Moses'), with the help of Grace Dieu. Later more pointedly identified with Moses by the Pilgrim (*Vie 1*, vv. 798, 825, 827, etc.), this figure unites Old Testament typological prefiguration of the ecclesiastical hierarchy with New Testament clerical role as he transforms bread and wine into body and blood:

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[24] Scholarship on Deguilleville's *Pèlerinage de vie humaine* has recently been flourishing: see, for example, the essays in *Guillaume de Digulleville*, ed. by Duval and Pomel; *The 'Pèlerinage'*, ed. by Viereck Gibbs Kamath and Nievergelt and the *OPVS* project: www.opvs.fr [accessed 31.07.2017]. For an edition of the author's first recension of the poem, upon which Chantilly 617's play is based, see Guillaume de Deguilleville, *Le Pèlerinage*, ed. by Stürzinger (hereafter *Vie 1*). For his second recension, see Guillaume de Deguilleville, *Le Livre du Pèlerin*, ed. and trans. by Edwards and Maupeu.

[25] Fabienne Pomel discusses the affinities between Deguilleville's dialogic, polyvocal structure and drama, noting that the *Pèlerinage*'s format lends itself to quasi-dramatic delivery, particularly if read aloud: Pomel, 'La théâtralité', § 16–24.

[26] *Le jeu de pelerinage*, ed. by Bouhaik-Girones, Doudet, and Hindley, vv. 1–4; my translation.

> Char vouloit avoir a mengier
> Et sanc avec pour deffacier
> La vielle loy qui dit avoit
> Que nul sanc mengier ne devoit.
> Pour li aidier Grace appela
> Et elle tantost i ala.
> Lors vi unes grans merveilles
> A qui nulles (ne) sont parelles:
> Le pain en char vive mua
> Ainsi com Grace l'ordena,
> Le vin mua an sanc vermeil
> Qui bien sembloit estre d'aignel

(He [Moses] wished to have meat/flesh to eat, and blood with it to wipe out the old law, which had said that he should not eat any blood. To help him, he called Grace Dieu, and she went to him immediately. Then I saw a great marvel, to which nothing can compare: the bread changed into living flesh, just as Grace Dieu ordered it, and the wine changed into red blood, which seemed to be from a lamb).[27]

It is immediately after this scene that the play begins, firstly with the character Reason's incomprehension of what she has just witnessed, expressed in discussion with the Pilgrim, then with the character Nature's debate with Grace Dieu about the possibility and the viability of transforming bread into body and wine into blood.[28]

One of the characteristics of Deguilleville's poem is the way in which it at times draws the reader's focalisation fully onto a specific character or discussion, something akin to a zoom function on a touch-screen. Frequently, there is a range of action, or of other characters, present as a backdrop or precursor to a particular interaction, but the reader easily (if not always permanently) loses sight of them, because the reader's narrative experiences are channelled through the *Pilgrim's* interactions with other characters, and the experiences, sights and encounters of his journey. When reading this section of the *Pèlerinage,* then, it is relatively easy to forget, at least sporadically, as the discussion between Raison and the Pilgrim, then Nature and Grace Dieu progresses, that it is happening in front of this 'backdrop' of transubstantiation by Moses. Crucially, such forgetting would not have been possible for the actors who performed this section of the narrative as a play. 'Ce maingier', whose presence

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[27] *Vie 1*, vv. 1439–50, my translation.

[28] Chantilly 617's *Jeu de pelerinage* adapts material running from *Vie 1*, v. 1471 to v. 5030.

clearly opens the play, demands a physical reality of some sort to which the actors refer. Fabienne Pomel has suggested persuasively that the play may have opened not with the words of the Pilgrim, but with an unscripted celebration of the Eucharist.[29] Such a celebration—and its effects—cannot disappear from view as the play progresses, like the Pilgrim's description of it in Deguilleville's poem can. Rather, the Host has to remain physically fully present as the play unfolds, and the actors embodying the various characters who explore, contest and defend its integrity are compelled to play alongside and around it.

Later in the play, two further allegorical characters named 'Penitance' and 'Carité' will explain how they control and mediate access to the Eucharist. In both cases, the characters' speeches self-referentially describe their physical, on-stage, spatial relationship to the place at which the Host is apparently located and where the act of transubstantiation occurred. Penitance situates herself 'Devant la table Moÿsi' (v. 321, 'in front of the table of Moses') on which is found '*ce* relief' (v. 325, 'this relief', i.e. the Host). The deictic 'ce' once again marks the physical location of the actors in relation to the sacrament and Moses. Carité, meanwhile, describes herself even more pointedly as 'Entre la table Moÿsi | Et entre vos' (vv. 394–95, 'between you and the table of Moses'). Playing these roles in the Real Presence inculcates *experientially* the need—for example—to properly confess before taking communion, in the bodily experiences of the actors involved. It does so at the same time as it explains the spiritual reasons for that need, and gives shape to the abstract processes by which penitence and charity open the way to bodily, Eucharistic union with Christ.

Furthermore, Pomel and Doudet both draw attention to the fact that, within the *Pèlerinage*'s narrative, the Pilgrim witnesses others approaching to take communion in the course of the section of the poem which is dramatized. Within Penitance and Carité's speeches, and within dialogue between the Pilgrim and Grace Dieu, the play's author(s) retain references to 'gens qui dans le *Pèlerinage de Vie humaine* communient', despite the fact that the script contains no explicit stage directions for these people to enter (the Pilgrim's narrative descriptions of this sight unfolding have, of course, been excised), nor any indications of who might play them.[30] In fact, Penitance and Carité's arrival is prompted, in the *Pèlerinage,* by the appearance of a crowd of 'povres pelerins

[29] Pomel, 'La théâtralité', § 32: 'Le recours au déictique suppose un minimum de présence de l'hostie et laisse penser que la pièce débute sur une célébration.'

[30] Pomel, 'La théâtralité', § 32, and see *Le Jeu de pelerinage*, ed. by Bouhaïk-Gironès, Doudet, and Hindley, p. 599 n. 3 (note to v. 220) and p. 608 n. 1 (note to vv. 410–19).
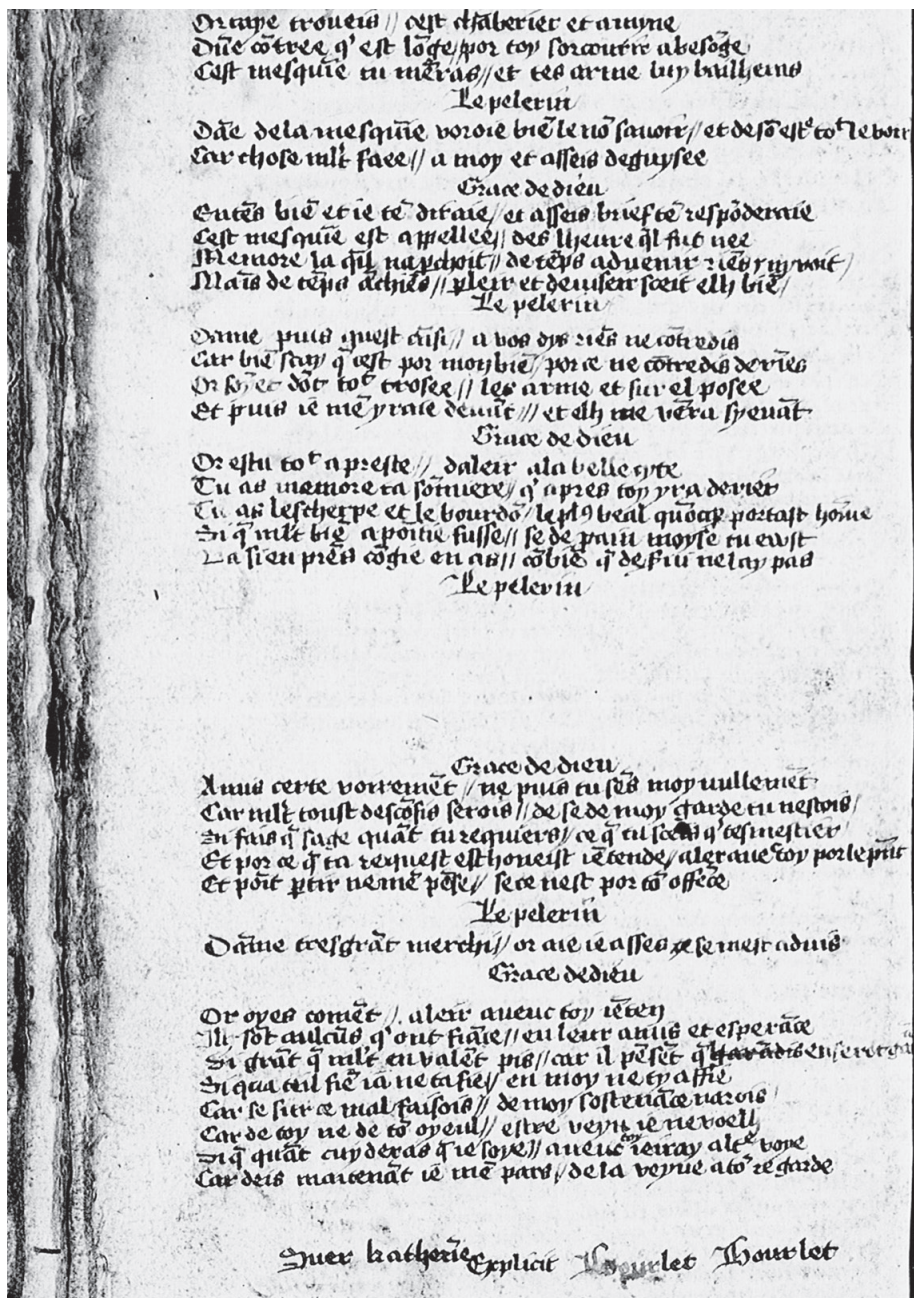
Figure 2. Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS 617 fol. 27ᵛ (detail).
Photo: CNRS-IHRT © Bibliothèque du Château de Chantilly.

errans' (*Vie 1*, v. 2009, 'poor wandering pilgrims') to whom Moses intends to distribute alms, in the form of the Host.[31] Some of these wandering pilgrims, after they have been addressed by Penitance and Carité, move forward to take the Host, observed by the pilgrim-narrator: 'Lors vi pluseurs des pelerins [...] du relief recurent | Lequel Moises leur donna | Si com Charite l'ordena' (*Vie 1*, vv. 2639–52, quoted at vv. 2641 and 2650–52, 'Then I saw many of the pilgrims [...], they were receiving relief, which Moses gave them, as Charity ordered it'). The fact that references to these individuals and their actions are present in the play's dialogue suggests that communion may well have been taken onstage, mid-play, by its audience, who might have transformed themselves into the group of pilgrim-communicants.[32] If this were the case, performance would embed the community's shared reception of the Eucharist into the play, transforming it into what Pomel terms 'un jeu de communiants' rather than simply un 'jeu de pelerinage humaine'.[33] The Pilgrim's own reception of the Host takes place in the section of the *Pèlerinage* which forms the very end of the play, as he is invited by Grace Dieu to approach the table and receive 'pain Moÿse' (*Jeu de pelerinage,* v. 1225, 'the bread of Moses.' Cf. *Vie 1*, vv. 4953–74, in which the narrator describes undertaking this action at the prompting of Grace Dieu). As Doudet notes, a blank space is left in the play manuscript at this point, directly after Grace Dieu's invitation and before her next words to the Pilgrim (fol. 27ᵛ, see Fig. 2).[34] It is introduced by the words 'Le Pelerin', the speech marker which introduces the Pilgrim's words. This unusual space, as Doudet argues, may cue the Pilgrim's silent reception of the Host, before Grace Dieu continues to speak.

The suggestion that this play might have followed a Eucharistic celebration and even contained within it a communal sharing of the Eucharist is just that: a suggestion. There are absolutely no indications in the manuscript to suggest anything whatsoever happening prior to the play's opening line, cited above. However, it would seem that the absence of scripted information, in this case, cannot indicate a total absence of action: something needs to happen, or to be

[31] For this description, see *Vie 1*, vv. 2005–38.

[32] There are indications in other plays from Chantilly 617 that the nuns were interested in the ways in which audience members could be brought into the dramatic action at particular points. I suggested earlier, for example, that the audience become 'le peuple' at moments within their Nativity play; more extensive discussion of other such moments is found in Cheung-Salisbury and others, 'Medieval Convent Scripts'.

[33] Pomel, 'La théâtralité', § 32.

[34] *Le Jeu de pelerinage*, ed. by Bouhaïk-Gironès, Doudet, and Hindley, p. 646, n. 2.

on stage, at the start of the play to form the referent to which the Pilgrim so clearly alludes. A different scenario might see the Carmelite sisters learning the priestly gestures, processions and movements of the mass, and potentially also repurposing or approximating the relevant liturgical vestments and accoutrements, in order to bodily 'mime' or 'enact' a silent simulacrum of the rite, as an immediate precursor to the play. Indeed, Pomel goes on to suggest that such a mime may be more plausible than an actual celebration, and that a keen apprehension of the conceptual *difference* between the symbolic gestures of the Mass, and the utterance of the correct words (the latter *only* bringing about transubstantiation) might well enable a mime to happen as part of a play:

> [P]our Pierre Lombard, par exemple, les gestes et signes ont une importance symbolique, mais la consécration et transsubstantiation ne se font que lorsque les paroles sont prononcées. Dès lors, rien n'empêche de figurer l'Eucharistie sans sacrement.[35]

The physical effects and experience of doing this—rather than those of performing alongside and in dialogue with the consecrated Real Presence—might nonetheless be powerful in quite a different way for their Carmelite performers and spectators. Writing of lay actors undertaking scenes such as the Last Supper or the Annunciation within Middle English secular Biblical drama, Walker explores some of the contradictory cultural effects or consequences which the experience of taking part in these plays *may* have produced in their participants:

> The actors who performed ... and the audiences who witnessed these scenes, would have spoken words and seen actions that were normally the preserve of the priesthood alone. To have done so may well have given them a special sense of personal investment in these events which might strengthen and enrich their orthodox faith. But it might also, perhaps, even if only subconsciously, have reduced their reliance upon the priesthood as the sole mediators of these mysteries.[36]

Miming the Eucharist without the sacrament might encourage the sisters to mentally visualize or to *imagine* transubstantiation occurring at their own hands, as they perform the gestures and movements habitually reserved for members of the priesthood. In the absence of an actual Eucharistic celebration at the opening of the performance, *imagined* transubstantiation is an outcome which is necessary at an intra-diegetic level for the plot of the play to unfold

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35 Pomel, 'La théâtralité', § 33.

36 Walker, 'The Cultural Work', p. 82.

meaningfully, even as a mime of the appropriate ceremony would, presumably, not have been understood by its enactors as 'really' being a Mass at an extra-diegetic or extra-theatrical level. Nonetheless, physical enactment of the sacred, ritualised and codified priestly gestures and movements associated with the Mass offers the performers the opportunity to instigate the rite imaginatively; and, moreover, to experience something of participating in that rite from a perspective from which their femininity would ordinarily debar them. This is not to suggest that such actions (if, indeed, they ever occurred) should be read as designedly unorthodox or as a deliberate and provocative challenge to the status quo. Rather, it is to posit that performing this piece of convent theatre may have offered an opportunity for unfamiliar (and maybe, for some, transgressive) bodily and cognitive experiences, and for new ways of thinking about the ritual processes of the Eucharist to occur within the play's creative framework as a result of those experiences.

Perhaps the clearest articulation which I have encountered of such experiential, performance-anchored epistemic power is found not in a medieval play, but in a contemporary novel *about* such a play. Barry Unsworth's 1995 *Morality Play* blends theatrical-historical fiction with traditional detective story in surprisingly effective ways. Throughout the novel, its central character and narrator, Nicholas Barber, who is both medieval actor and priest, explores the processes by which theatrical embodiment—*performing* the murder which forms the crux of the whodunnit plot as a play—led, uniquely, to apprehension of the truth, when other forms of investigation could not. Indeed, in the course of the novel, we witness enlightenment dawning on its protagonists, not during the times at which they discuss the murder, but rather *onstage*, when they attempt to improvise and enact it. Theatrical embodiment tests the previous narratives which have been constructed about the murder, and exposes their gaps, inconsistencies and implausibilities. Attempting to describe the complex physical and cognitive processes by which he and his companions arrive at the truth experientially, through theatre, Nicholas explains that:

> [I]t was not only the things that we learned by enquiry. [...] We learned through the play. [...] We learned through the parts we were given. The player is himself and another. [...] From this come thoughts and words that, outside the play, he would not readily admit to his mind.[37]

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[37] Unsworth, *Morality Play*, pp. 170–71.

The experience of theatrical embodiment, Unsworth suggests, inculcates fresh methods of thinking or 'enquiring'. Creating a play and undertaking its performance, crucially, can develop new ways of understanding and conceptualising already-known, familiar phenomena; new methods of 'researching' or of coming to comprehend them; new perspectives from which to approach them.

Of course, the Carmelite sisters whose plays I have been discussing in this article were not seeking knowledge of a guilty party by playing out the known circumstances and partially-understood traces of a crime committed within the community. However, their epistemic theatrical work may still function to test received narratives or experiences of a different kind. The well-known episode of the Shepherds' visit to the manger, for example, appears in their Nativity play to have been incrementally augmented with characters and actions, at least some of which we might read as responses to perceived insufficiencies, gaps, or 'unknowns' within the traditional narrative, apprehension of which may have been triggered by the experience of *performing* that narrative, and a solution to which is created communally through developing theatrical techniques. The ritual of communion, meanwhile, might feel quite different when experienced within the *Jeu de pelerinage humaine* as a rite to be performatively embodied within the narrative context of the play, rather than a rite in which to participate in the habitual way. The knowledge thus generated experientially—about the actions and mechanics of the Eucharist, about its spiritual prerequisites and its place within the play's narrative and within the community—might then modify the sisters' future experiences of the rite profoundly. Within these surviving Carmelite sisters' plays, then, the 'epistemic values' unique to experiencing theatrical performance are, potentially, both far-reaching and transformative.

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Internet Resources

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OPVS (Old Pious Vernacular Successes) project: www.opvs.fr