CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: THE AUTHORITY OF THE AUDIENCE

1 Pastor: Lord, what these weders ar cold!
   And I am yll happyd.
   I am nerehande dold,
   So long haue I nappyd;
   My legys thay fold,
   My fyngers ar chappyd.
   It is not as I wold,
   For I am al lappyd
   In sorow.¹

1 Pastor: Fare well, lady,
   So fare to beholde,
   With thy childe on thi kne.

2 Pastor: Bot he lygys full cold.
   Lord, well is me!
   Now we go, thou behold.

3 Pastor: Forsythe, allredy
   It semys ro be told
   Full oft.²

The Towneley Second Shepherds’ Play, probably the medieval drama best known to English-speaking audiences, and one already discussed in terms of money and class in Chapter 5, opens in a world in desperate need, both physical and (though the shepherds do not always recognize this) spiritual; although most of the play concerns the shepherds’ attempts to meet their physical needs, it ends in a world still cold and hungry, but spiritually satisfied (the second passage above clearly contradicts one critic’s view that physical cold represents spiritual need).³ In Chapter 5 I suggested that this final state of satisfaction represents a co-optation of the class issues raised at the beginning by a Christian

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panacea. In this chapter, I would like to examine more closely just how the play is able to arrive at this state—by means of a theatrical experience within the play itself that links the beginning with the end. I will then turn to comparable quasi-theatrical events depicted in other biblical dramas to make some suggestions about how the audiences of these plays, both those depicted in the play texts and those who watch them, might be related to the issues of power and resistance that I have discussed in other contexts.

As I suggested in the introduction, while the Christian orientation of the medieval biblical drama may be resisted in some of the ways I have been suggesting in the intervening chapters, it is well-nigh impossible to resist permanently, given the overtly religious function of these plays. As we examine the relationship of drama to audience in this concluding chapter, it may well seem that the moment has come when the Christian orientation, with all its exclusions, must be accepted as these plays’ hermeneutic degree zero: we shall see that the plays do a remarkably good job of constructing their audience members as specifically Christian subjects, or, better, of inviting the audience so to construct itself. But as we consider a number of plays that represent this theatrical experience onstage, we may also ask whether it might be possible to pry apart their religious and theatrical functions, that is, not to understand theater as a form of didactic religious expression, but rather to understand religion as a pretext for the production of theatrical exchanges, for theater as a collaboration between play and audience, one in which the audience has at least as much power as the performance.

Antonin Artaud famously argued for a “theater of cruelty,” which would not necessarily involve “bloodshed, martyred flesh, crucified enemies,” though it might. More importantly, the theater of cruelty was to have a direct physical and emotional impact on its audience, and indeed on the performers themselves: it is the contact between the two that Artaud seems to have in mind in his descriptions of such a theater, “a theater that wakes us up: nerves and heart,” “the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets.” The quasi-medievalist sensibility evinced in this nostalgia for a disappearing festive world is reinforced in Artaud’s description of performance practice: rather than “dallying with forms,” performers should be “like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames.” Artaud’s desire to recuperate a fantasized, theatricalized Middle Ages of festivals and public burnings may be lurid, but Jody Enders, in a book whose title is derived from Artaud, suggests nevertheless that ancient and medieval rhetorical theory and theatrical practice do indeed anticipate Artaud and