

**Envisioning the Good, the Beautiful, and the Ugly:  
American Deaf Adaptation and Appropriation of *Everyman***

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*Introduction: Listening with Our Eyes*

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, there was a man in Cornwall named Grisling, who was well known to be “deafe from a longe time” and yet had “a strange quality” (a talent, in this case) “to understand what you say by marking the moving of your lips . . . so as (contrary to the rules of nature, and yet without the help of arte) he can see wordes as they pass forth of your mouth.”<sup>1</sup> Apparently, there has always been a mystique about deaf people as being those who are dependent upon *listening with their eyes*. And yet, is that not what all readers initially do, regardless of hearing ability—including scholars of medieval writings—*listen with their eyes*? This idea of *silent reading* is not new; however, it is difficult for many to conceive just the same. Indeed, many of us have seen students read aloud to themselves, be it the whispers of a verbal language or the minimized movements of a sign language. The difference is that one language read aloud must be heard while the other must be seen.<sup>2</sup> This adds an emphasis of meaning to the old question: *if a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, did it make a sound?* If a tree falls in the wood and no one is there to see it, did it fall?

Perhaps medieval scribes understood the limitations of printed (and thus silenced) words? Consider, for example, this image:

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Carew, *The Survey of Cornwall*, Book 2 (London: S. Stafford, 1602), 113.

<sup>2</sup> If you are struggling with the concept of signing “aloud,” consider this: “shouting louder and louder” in ASL is achieved by larger and larger movements, with the hands moving further and further away from the body, the grammatical expressions on the face becoming wider and wider, the upper body even puffs up, and the movement also tends to become more rapid, as speaking does in an angry argument.

There begynneth a treatyse how þe  
 fader of heuen sendeth dethe to so-  
 mon every creature to come and  
 gyue a counte of theyr lyues in  
 this worlde; and is in maner  
 of a moꝛall playe.



This is the frontispiece from an edition of *Everyman* published by John Sklot in roughly 1530. It portrays the two key characters of the play: Everyman and Death. While the description above the image explains the action, the image shows the action and much more. Death has a long finger pointed at Everyman, who is looking behind him and, looking upon Death with a grimace on his face, waves his hands in the air as if to be waving Death off, as he is walking away from him. The words above the image read (my translation): *Here begins a treatise [of] how the high father of heaven sent Death to summon every creature to come and give account of themselves in this world, and is in [the] manner of a moral play.* The tension between image and words emphasizes the differences in action: the written words (representing sound) describe the action of the written words' narrative and the genre of the play, while the drawing (representing action) describes the action of characters in the narrative of the play. That the visual is at least highly important to medieval performance is indirectly supported by Clifford Davidson's argument in reference to British medieval vernacular plays: "Though there is every reason to believe that acting perceived to be naturalistic was in fact heavily indebted to conventional visual expectations, vibrant and lively performance would have been the goal—and perhaps a goal more often than not achieved in these plays, which were highly admired in their time."<sup>3</sup>

Yet isn't the ultimate goal of reading a printed playscript to perform it, to have it recited, spoken aloud—with or without visible gestures of body and facial expression? Even when a hand, body or

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Davidson, "Gesture in Medieval British Drama," in *Gesture in Medieval Drama and Art*, ed. Clifford Davidson, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 28 (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 67.

facial gesture is important, it is only to enhance the spoken words, often drawn in the margins of a manuscript, hence literally and figuratively marginalized to a lesser level of importance. Many of us cannot fathom living in partial, highly distorted, or total silence, much less conceive of the idea that those who actually do live this way all of their lives are quite comfortable with it. This same *addiction to sound* prevents medieval scholars from appreciating the visual nature of written/printed texts, and even if such texts have been recorded as a priority means of preserving what was heard, the denial of silence permeates: it is very difficult to acknowledge that, despite the significant progress of linguistics, scholars will never ever be truly certain of how medieval words once sounded.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, such a lack of certainty is not only acknowledged but also virtually dismissed as being unimportant by culturally Deaf Americans<sup>5</sup> who have adapted medieval British works, and the advantage of this alternative sense of priorities (the visual over the audio) is quite revealing. (Indeed, sign language interpreters struggle not to “steal the show” from vocalizing actors on stage by seemingly performing what they hear for interpretation.) Though published in contemporary written English, Willy Conley’s adaptation of *Everyman* into a contemporary story is primarily intended to be expressed in American Sign Language (or in both spoken English and ASL at the same time) on the stage.<sup>6</sup> Conley’s adaptation, *For Every Man, Woman, and Child—a modern morality play inspired by EVERYMAN*, reveals a great deal about a medieval British culture and its verbal language to which most of us, whether we like to acknowledge it or not, are *deaf*. For example, it reminds us and even taunts us with the importance of the visual over the audiological in medieval drama. It also emphasizes the significance of visible gestural communication over language—for *both* hearing and deaf theatre audiences. Additionally, in contextualizing the morals of *Everyman* into a more contemporary setting, Conley’s adaptation returns to the carnivalesque atmosphere of medieval church drama with a cynical form of hindsight: the carnival is dirty, run down, occupied by hoodlums, and its owner/manager is Death, who can neither speak nor sign, who can only communicate with visible gestures and pantomime. A comparison between *Everyman* and *For Every Man, Woman and Child* reveals the adaptation of a starkly medieval image of the end of life into a darkly contemporary setting. In comparing these two plays, the emphasis upon what we see over what we hear becomes crystal clear, and in order to help form a tighter and (hopefully) more

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<sup>4</sup> I am not attacking the accuracy of linguistic sciences; I am merely pointing out the discomfort of the (still) limiting qualities of historical sciences. Just as we may never know exactly how dinosaurs looked, we may never know exactly how pre-contemporary languages sounded. No one takes comfort in such ignorance, of course, and so the drive to pursue further knowledge continues, perhaps to a point of insanity.

<sup>5</sup> There are two types of cultures (at least). There are those who are technically deaf at some level (and very few people are completely ‘stone deaf’). This is the medical definition of a deaf culture that struggles to survive in a hearing world, using verbal languages. There are those who are culturally Deaf, however, who are immersed within a society in which a signed language is used as the primary, native language. Someone who is culturally Deaf may not be technically deaf (being the hearing child of Deaf parents, for example). Moreover, there are well over 100 naturally developed signed languages all over the contemporary world.

<sup>6</sup> Movie trailer, *Listening to You, Listening to Me, Listening to Everyone—A Neomedieval, Deaf/Hearing, Community Theatre Project*, Filmmaker Carol L. Robinson, DVD, Hounding Productions, 2012, 2017.  
<http://www.houndingproductions.org/everyone.html>.

revealing comparison, I am examining this play adaptation in terms of the motifs of *good deeds*, *beauty*, *death* and *ugliness*.

*An Adaptation of Everyman: A Carnival of Death, Good Deeds, and Beauty*

According to Conley, he studied *Everyman* in an undergraduate English class that was taught by the famous Deaf poet and teacher, Robert F. Panara, at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID, of Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY) in the late 1970s/early 1980s. He also performed in a production by the Experimental Educational Theatre (now called the Performing Arts Department) at NTID.

[\[VIDEO CLIP #1: Conley describing Panara teaching \*Everyman\* in ASL\]](#)

Later he adapted the play himself, writing it in contemporary English in a contemporary plot and setting, with the intention that it would be translated into American Sign Language to be performed on the stage by Deaf actors. Hence, these Deaf students read the late Middle English play and discussed it in contemporary American Sign Language. Compare this hard juxtaposition of two completely different languages (one is sound-based and an earlier version of contemporary English while the other is a visually based contemporary sign language) with the typical English speaking class in which there is a softer juxtaposition of two versions of the same sound-based language. Moreover, it is noteworthy that sound is enhanced in the spoken English classroom, as the printed word is transcribed to spoken words, while sound is marginalized (if not eliminated) in the Deaf classroom as the medieval English text is translated and discussed in ASL. In other words, the ASL discussion is closer to the sound level of the printed text than the spoken English discussion. Does the transcription of a printed (silent) word into its likely sound equivalent add more meaning, or take meaning away?

Willy Conley's adaptation of *Everyman* is a play written in contemporary English with contemporary values. For the actor trained for rhythm and other audiological poetics, the play, *For Every Man, Woman and Child—a modern morality play inspired by EVERYMAN*, is a slightly awkward reading; however, that is because it is written in such a way as to emphasize the visual poetics of American Sign Language (which does not have a written form, except as printed on film and video) and American Deaf culture. Conley's adaptation emphasizes the universality of *Everyman* by changing the central character's name to Everyone, emphasizing the need to recognize the patriarchal drive behind the original allegory. The play also pulls upon the tradition of carnivals, which harks back to the carnival atmosphere in which many plays were performed in medieval times. Audience members are welcomed to the performance in the theatre lobby by a "festive-looking carnival atmosphere" that, according to Conley's instructions, sends the more contemporary message that "the carnival's

in town”<sup>7</sup>.

[[VIDEO CLIP #2](#): Death (a Deaf character) gestures and pantomimes that the character(s) Everyone is at his carnival. A small part of this clip, in which Death is fixing a broken light bulb for his carnival sign]

Conley’s adaptation also recognizes a universality of religion and belief that also embraces a form of ecological values. The plot’s motivation is provided by a discussion among several gods that represent religions from all over the world: they come together to share their dissatisfaction with Everyone, who does not even respect the Earth enough to keep it clean—just before this scene, an empty beer can is tossed carelessly upon the stage. The gods summon Death to take Everyone on a journey (to death). In other words, Conley’s play emphasizes the cultural lack of printed text preservation as well as demonstrates the possibilities of what that lack might be for a medieval performance.

Before continuing with my brief description of Conley’s adaptation, I wish to make note that it has taken scholars of language studies, as well as academic administrators, a long time to even recognize non-verbal languages as actually being *languages*, and even longer to recognize differences between a country’s dominant sound-based language and its dominant visually-based language. Many colleges and universities in the United States do not recognize American Sign Language as a “foreign” language, even though it is foreign to every non-native signer in the country; there are no similarities between ASL and English in either syntax or expression. “After long debate about whether American Sign Language is a real language — and whether it qualifies as a foreign language — a few universities now offer a major or minor in it, and many more accept sign language for their foreign-language requirement.”<sup>8</sup> The fight to have signed languages, of which there are many all over the world, recognized as being more than merely “gestural” and/or “primitive” forms of expression is relatively young and still ongoing. As neuroscientist Laura-Ann Petitto recently summarized, “Over 40 years of intensive research by Linguists, Psychologists, Psycholinguists, and Cognitive Neuroscientists, have demonstrated that the signed languages of the world in general, and American Sign Language (ASL) in particular, are real languages.”<sup>9</sup> Part of the meaning for the term *audism*, in fact, is the failure to recognize the reality and importance of signed languages for Deaf communities.<sup>10</sup> “Consider audist policies concerning the language of the American deaf community,” wrote Harlan Lane in the early 1990s:

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<sup>7</sup> Willy Conley, *For Every Man, Woman, and Child—A Modern Morality Play Inspired by EVERYMAN*, in *Vignettes of the Deaf Character and Other Plays* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Tamar Lewin, “Colleges See 16% Increase in the Study of Sign Language,” *New York Times* (8 Dec. 2010), A20.

<sup>9</sup> Laura-Ann Petitto, “Are Sign Languages Real Languages?” *Our Studies*, Brain and Language Laboratory of Neuroimaging, accessed 29 September 2016, <http://petitto.net/our-studies/mythbusters/are-sign-languages-real/>.

<sup>10</sup> The word capitalized, *Deaf*, recognizes the cultures of people who use a sign language as the primary, native, language.

This is a telling point, for language is not only a means of communication; it is also a repository of cultural knowledge and a symbol of social identity. In hearing people's milieu, languages are spoken; since deaf people rarely speak, hearing professionals have long contended that deaf people command little or no language.<sup>11</sup>

William C. Stokoe, in his last book, *Language in Hand: Why Sign Came Before Speech*, concluded: "Instead of searching for precise brain areas or particular genes for particular grammatical functions, linguists and psycholinguists might take more notice of current neuroscience, which finds that brains work with broad connectivity—integrating vision, physical movement, and cognition, and finding intricate patterns within existing wholes."<sup>12</sup>

Conley's play demonstrates the significant differences between a gestured language and gesturing in general: the former is any one of a number of signed languages that are made up of a grammatical system of specific movements made by the upper body, particularly the fingers, hands, arms, and face, while the latter is a much more chaotic form of communication used to supplement a language or, in worst case scenario, serve as a weak substitute for language. The character Death, who happens to also be deaf, can only communicate with gestures and pantomime; he has no language ability (neither spoken nor signed); he is truly handicapped.

However, this handicap is also perhaps the most medieval aspect of this morality play adaptation. Gesture is timeless, if not also language-less: it is a part of the larger portrait of communication, including in religious conveyances. Geoffrey Chaucer's Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales*, for example, states "Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne / That it is joye to se my bisnesse."<sup>13</sup> Dunbar H. Ogden argues that "American Sign Language used by today's deaf community encompasses this distinction between a gestural sign and an attitude conveyed along with it."<sup>14</sup> In the particular case of Conley's characterization of Death, the contemporary audience (Deaf and hearing) must struggle to understand the meaning(s) of Death's gestures and pantomimes, literally and figuratively.

[[VIDEO CLIP #3](#): *Death explains to Everyone that he/she must produce a list of good deeds and a list of bad deeds.*]<sup>15</sup>

The character Everyone helps the audience to understand the meaning(s) of Death's gestures and

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<sup>11</sup> Harlan Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 45.

<sup>12</sup> William C. Stokoe, *Language in Hand: Why Sign Came before Speech* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2001), 200-201.

<sup>13</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Prologue," *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Wadsworth Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 1987), ll. 112-13.

<sup>14</sup> Dunbar H. Ogden, "Gesture and Characterization in the Liturgical Drama," in *Gesture in Medieval Drama*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 34.

<sup>15</sup> In this particular production, Everyone is performed by four actors: two hearing (one male, one female) and two Deaf (one male, one female).

pantomimes. Everyone is an interpreter for Death. That Death is soundless/non-verbal emphasizes traditional views of the concept of death: silent death, silent = death, dead calm, dead silent, silent as the grave. . . . Everyone interprets verbal silence, emphasizing the significance of visual noise.

As with Everyman in the medieval play, the character Everyone visits the allegorical character, Good Deeds (a social worker). Good Deeds in the original play is weak, physically unable to move: “Here I lie, cold in the ground; / Thy sins hath me sore bound, / That I cannot stir” (ll. 486-8). Good Deeds in Conley’s play is initially stuck behind a carnival poster with “a grotesque image of a woman with one arm and no legs” (162):

GOOD DEEDS: (*Weakly.*) You looking for g-o-o-d d-e-e-d-s? (*Finger-spelling.*) Hey—I’m talking to you . . . looking for g-o-o-d d-e-e-d-s?

EVERYONE: You’re scaring me. Death? Is that you? Cut it out!

GOOD DEEDS: I’m not dead! I’m still alive, but barely. Come here, help me, please. (*Gestures to the poster.*) Move this out of the way.

[EVERYONE moves the image out of the way and is horrified by what she sees—a woman with one arm and no legs, set on a box.]

GOOD DEEDS: You looking for g-o-o-d d-e-e-d-s? (*Dumbfounded, EVERYONE nods.*) That’s me. See what all of your sins have done to me? I’m so weak, I can hardly move.<sup>16</sup>

[[VIDEO CLIP #4](#): *Good Deeds shows her suffering.*]

This contemporary Good Deeds is very much akin to a social worker, overworked and underpaid, disabled by the system as well as by the bad deeds of her clients. Both the medieval and contemporary characters emphasize the visual-kinetic: unable to move, disabled, trapped. In fact, the words of the medieval text read more as instructions for what the audience should be *seeing* rather than what it should be hearing. Conley’s text takes those instructions one step further with the carnival poster (the visual blocking/handicapping the visual language) and the box (blocking the visibility of limbs, handicapping their visible movement). For both the contemporary and medieval Good Deeds, the only cure is confession; however, while a confession for hearing people is spoken sounds, both plays trap these sounds either behind other sounds or behind signed language (the visual). The medieval character Confession speaks that he knows Everyman’s bad deeds because of Knowledge; the deeds are cloaked in silence by Knowledge. For the act of confession in Conley’s play, however, there is no allegorical character for Confession; instead, the act of confession is done in shadow play, and so while a person who knows ASL might understand the confessions in this shadow play, it will not be clear. Thus, in both plays, the confessions are cloaked, both hidden from the audience, in audiological and visible silence (or at least near-silence).

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<sup>16</sup> Conley, *For Every Man, Woman, and Child*, 162-163.

In both plays, perhaps most visibly noisy is Beauty. Outer beauty is, after all and above all, intended to be *seen, to distract from the view of others*. And here is a bit of small irony from the medieval allegorical character:

BEAUTY. What, into this grave? Alas!

EVERYMAN. Yea, there shall ye consume, more and less.

BEAUTY. And what, should I smother here?

EVERYMAN. Yea, by my faith, and never more appear.

In this world live no more we shall,

But in heaven before the highest Lord of all.

BEAUTY. I cross out all this; adieu, by Saint John!

I take my cap in my lap, and am gone.

EVERYMAN. What, Beauty, whither will ye?

BEAUTY. Peace, I am deaf; I look not behind me,

Not and thou wouldest give me all the gold in thy chest [*Exit Beauty*]. (ll. 794-804)

In the medieval text, the reader sees that Beauty alludes to the silent symbolism of Death by killing Everyman's argument against her departure ("Peace, I am deaf") and emphasizes the importance of her visibility in describing her movements ("I . . . am gone"), as well as her gaze ("I look not behind me"). For the medieval Beauty, it is all about what we see and do not see. The contemporary character Beauty, who lives in the House of Mirrors at the carnival in Conley's play, also emphasizes the importance of her visibility:

BEAUTY: Well, I'm here. What do you want?

EVERYONE: I need all of you to come with me on a long journey.

STRENGTH: Who are you?

EVERYONE: Don't you two recognize me?

BEAUTY: (*Examines EVERYONE in the flesh and compares her with the mirror's reflection. She cleans a section of the mirror and looks at EVERYONE again in the reflection.*) OH! You are Everyone! (*She looks at herself and primps a little. Maybe puts on a dab of lipstick.*) Did you pass by my House of Mirrors?

EVERYONE: Yeah, a little while ago.

BEAUTY: You know, all of my mirrors have been dirty. Haven't been able to see a thing in the reflections—not even my own beauty. I'm going to have to clean every single mirror in my house. You know how many mirrors I have?

EVERYONE: I'm sure you have a lot. Would you please come with me on my journey? I'm going to need my beauty.

BEAUTY: Yes, you definitely need me. Your make-up is dreadful! And these clothes? Oh, please! We're going to need this mirror. Can we bring it along? (167)



[[VIDEO CLIP #5](#): *Beauty and her mirror.*]

*Conclusion: Do You See What I'm Saying?*

Linguistics, archeology, anthropology, and similar sciences have significantly broadened and deepened an objective appreciation for the medieval past. Adaptation writing, performance, creative reading, and (in these cases) the empowerment of visual culture over *hearing dependence* further broaden and deepen a subjective appreciation for both the medieval past and the contemporary filters—in this case, hearing “aids”—that may be hampering that appreciation that might actually be best done in silence (such as silent reading of the text). It is what we do that ultimately counts in the end. Seeing what we do is better conceived through gesture, pantomime and even sign languages than hearing about what we do. In comparing these two plays, the emphasis upon what we see over what we hear becomes crystal clear, for seeing is believing, and talk (spoken or signed) is cheap. No wonder *Everyman* is not appropriate for reader's theatre, at least not in words read aloud in a spoken language.