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Popular Religious Thought in Medieval England as Reflected in the Mystery Play Cycles of York, Toweley, Coventry, and Chester

Kenneth Streufert

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir_streufertk@csl.edu

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POPULAR RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND
AS REFLECTED IN THE MYSTERY PLAY CYCLES OF
YORK, TONNELEY, COVENTRY, AND CHESTER

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Historical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by

Kenneth Streufert

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Approved by:

J. A. Thiele
Advisor
Robert R. ...
Reader

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CHAPTER I

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MYSTERY CYCLES

The testimony of faith made by Christians in earlier times is of importance not only to the theological scholar, but to every Christian. This study is an effort to present such an earlier testimony. The people and period involved in this study are the average Christians in England during the fifteenth century. The vehicle selected to present their testimony is the religious drama of that period. The reasons for the selection of drama are twofold. In the first place, drama does reflect the thought of the people. Although it is true that a drama staged before a public tends to mold the thinking of that group, it is also true that to be accepted by the audience the play must be a reflection of the hearers' minds. In other words, the extent to which the hearer accepts what he sees and hears on the stage will be determined largely by the extent to which he can acknowledge that these things are true for him. It is for this reason that that drama which has a consistent popularity among a large segment of the average citizenry may be assumed to reflect the thoughts and sentiment of that group. In the second place, drama has been chosen as the source for this study because drama was a much more common mode of expression among the average people of England during this period than was, for example, the written word. The extent to which illiteracy restricted the expression of this class of people perhaps cannot be accurately determined. But it is certain that during this time plays were seen and enjoyed by the common people.

The particular plays that have been selected to form the basis for this study are especially well suited for this purpose. They are, first of all, plays which enjoyed a long popularity (from the early 1300's to the late 1500's). Consequently their validity as reflections of contemporary religious thinking is strengthened. In the second place, these particular plays were produced and performed, not by professional dramatists and actors, but by the ordinary people of England. And so their claim of being the reflection of the thoughts of the common people is also strengthened. In addition, since these plays are examples of plays from four distinct population areas, and since they represent in the aggregate a total of almost one hundred fifty separate dramatic productions, it is hoped that they will prove to portray a fairly accurate cross section of religious expression.

The scope of this study is not limited merely to a discussion of the contents of these religious cycles. Rather, there is some emphasis on the production of the plays as well; for the contents may reveal the theological formulations of the day, but it is only when these formulations are studied along side of the spirit in which the people approached the plays that the genuine religious temperament of the time can be understood. For this reason it will be relevant to this study to discuss such matters as the mechanics of the performance, the selection of the players, the reasons for the decline of the cycles, and similar aspects of the subject.

It should be noted that many of the more recent studies of these mystery plays have devoted considerable space to the matter of tracing the origins of these plays. Although such an investigation might prove

to be significant, the real purpose of this paper was not absolutely dependent upon such information. Therefore, except for a very general review of the development of the religious drama in medieval times and a summary statement regarding the divergent views regarding the origins, nothing more is said regarding this matter in this paper. The problem of origins deserves a special study of its own.

The first part of the paper is devoted to a description of the production and the performance of the plays. Particular effort is made to underscore the extent to which these mystery plays were the property and the expression of the laity rather than the clergy. The latter portion of the study is devoted to a more detailed examination of the contents of these plays. The general scope of these cycles is outlined. The various sources employed in the writing of these plays are noted, with special attention given to the manner in which these sources are used. Considerable space is devoted to the tracing of a number of theological emphases through the various plays. The inclusion of such paramount Christian teachings as the person of Christ, salvation and judgment needs no apology. However, the choice of some of the other teachings may appear to be arbitrary. Nevertheless there were reasons for their selection. In some instances teachings were traced largely because of their interest for the theological historian of today (e.g., the teachings regarding Mary and those regarding hell and limbo.) In other instances the plays themselves, by their own repeated emphasis, suggested that certain topics were significant for the people of that day, and consequently for this study as well.

Much of the material used in connection with the description of

the production of the plays is based on secondary sources. However, for the content of the plays primary sources are used. Since these plays underwent considerable changes and revisions during the many years of their performance, and since one of the main purposes of this paper is to describe the religious sentiment of one rather specific period in history, it is of more than usual importance to note the exact dates of the original manuscripts on which this study is based. With the exception of the York Cycle the texts for all cycles used in this study are those published for the Early English Text Society. The text for the Coventry Cycle is based on a manuscript from the Cotton Collection, designated as Vespasian D. viii, which is dated 1468.¹ The York text is based on a manuscript found in the library of the Earl of Ashburnham which was compiled most probably between 1430 and 1440.² The Towneley text has its source in an undated manuscript of the fifteenth century in the possession of Mr. Bernard Quaritch at the time of its publication.³ The Chester text is based on the manuscript designated Harleian 2124, compiled in 1607.⁴ Of the four texts

¹Ludus Coventriae or the Plaie Called Corpus Christi, edited by K. S. Block, published for the Early English Text Society (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1922).

²York Plays, edited by Lucy Toulmin Smith (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1885).

³The Towneley Plays, edited by George England and Alfred W. Pollard, published for the Early English Text Society (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1897).

⁴The Chester Cycle of plays is published in two separate editions, the one comprising plays I through a portion of play XIII, the other beginning with the concluding portion of play XIII and continuing to the end of the cycle, play XXIV: The Chester Plays, edited by Herman Deimling, published for the Early English Text Society

the last is the most suspect inasmuch as its date of compilation falls after the reform efforts of the sixteenth century. For this reason the use of this text, and consequently the use of the Chester Cycle itself, as a reflection of pre-reformation thinking and sentiment is subject to question. However, in spite of this theoretical defect, this cycle is of such importance for this study that it could not be disregarded. Consequently, for the sake of complete historical accuracy the contributions of this cycle are not used as primary evidence, but are used rather to corroborate the evidence of the other cycles.

(London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truebner & Co., 1893); The Chester Plays, edited by Dr. [G. W.] Matthews, published for the Early English Text Society (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truebner & Co., 1916).

*Fortellian, "In Spontanea," translated by S. E. Russell, The
 Anglo-Saxon Poets, edited by Alexander Roberts and James
 Orchardson, reprint of Edinburgh Edition, Buffalo: The Ontario Library
 Publishing Co., 1906), 112, 84.*

*Geoffrey W. Clarke, The Miracle Play in England (London: W.
 B. Eerdmans Co., 1907), p. 8.*

CHAPTER II

THE FORMATION OF THE MYSTERY CYCLES

It was during the medieval period that the Church discovered for itself that drama could be a useful tool. The early Church had denounced the drama of its day in no uncertain terms. Tertullian wrote,

At first the theatre was properly a temple of Venus; and, to speak briefly, it was owing to this that stage performances were allowed to escape censure, and got a footing in the world. . . . the theatre of Venus is as well the house of Bacchus: . . . and, without doubt, the performances of the theatre have the common patronage of these two dieties. . . . You will hate, O Christian, the things whose authors must be the objects of your utter detestation.¹

And this abhorrence with which the Church viewed the excesses of the drama of the first and second centuries resulted in a separation between the Church and drama which lasted for the better part of a thousand years. But in time the Church came to see that it was not the essence, but rather the content which could make drama an evil thing. More than this, the Church began to see that drama possessed certain qualities for instruction and stimulation of the faith which were to be found in no other means of communication. The Church which, for its own purpose, had suppressed drama at one time in history, now during the medieval period was obliged to resurrect it once again for its own purpose.² The main purpose which the Church had in mind at this time

¹Tertullian, "De Spectaculis," translated by S. Thelwall, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (American reprint of Edinburgh Edition; Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), III, 84.

²Sidney W. Clarke, The Miracle Play in England (London: Wm. Andrews Co., 1897), p. 4.

was instruction and strengthening. Craig has noted, "The medieval religious drama existed primarily to give religious instruction, establish faith, and encourage piety."³

There is much evidence to support the claim that religious drama did not spring up in the medieval period without any warning. There are examples of religious plays throughout the centuries which portray a continuing, albeit a rather restricted, interest in drama within the Christian Church. There is, for example, the play Christos Paschon dating from the fourth century and attributed generally to Gregory Nazianzen. There are also the tenth century contributions of Hroswitha, the Benedictine nun of Gandersheim in Saxony, who, although following the pattern of Terence in style, still presented as her theme the glorification of martyrdom and chastity.⁴ One of the earliest recorded dramatic presentations in England took place in the first part of the twelfth century at Dunstable, which is connected with the Abbey of St. Albans. Here a Norman clerk, Geffrei, presented his original play, St. Katherine.⁵ A passage from William Fitzstephen's Life of the Holy Archbishop and Martyr, Thomas indicates that religious plays were common in London around the year 1170. He wrote,

³Hardin Craig, English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 15.

⁴Katherine Bates, The English Religious Drama (New York: MacMillan & Co., 1893), p. 4.

⁵Alfred Bates, editor, Drama, Its History, Literature, and Influence on Civilization (London: Historical Publishing Co., 1903), IV, 39. It is reported that on the night following the performance the borrowed costumes were destroyed in a fire which swept the building. Geffrei saw the hand of God in this and forsaking further playwriting took holy orders.

Instead of theatrical exhibitions, instead of scenic plays, London has plays of a holier kind, representations of the miracles which the holy confessors worked, or of the sufferings in which the constancy of the martyrs was gloriously confirmed.⁶

Whatever might have been the source of inspiration which prompted the writing of these early plays, it is generally held that it was the liturgy of the Church that was the source for the later mystery plays.⁷ Some have viewed the whole mass as a dramatic expression. Thus Alfred Bates says, "the celebration of the mass contained a dramatic element, the reading of the Scripture forming the epic portion, and the anthems and responses the lyrical features of the service."⁸ Others have said, "The origin of the religious drama begins with tropes."⁹ Particularly, the source is to be found in the Easter trope which provided an opportunity to present in dramatic form the story of the visit of the Three Marys to the tomb. It was presented in this fashion: Three priests, representing the Three Marys, slowly advanced up the church aisle to the place where the tomb had been set. Another priest, representing the angel, asked whom they seek. They reply that it is Jesus. The dialogue followed the Gospel account until a priest, representing Jesus, appeared to announce His Resurrection. Then the chorus joins in

⁶Ibid., p. 40.

⁷One dissenting voice is that of Oscar Cargill, Drama and Liturgy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), pp. 27f. He does not disagree with the view that the liturgy was the source for the later plays; but he does oppose the view that from the very beginning the elaboration of the tropes was a deliberate effort to represent the biblical story in dramatic form.

⁸Alfred Bates, op. cit., p. 6.

⁹Craig, op. cit., p. 30.

with a joyous alleluia and the play ends with a Te Deum.¹⁰

In time also the Christmas story was represented in dramatic fashion. On Christmas Eve the cradle was placed in the chancel of the church with the image of Mary beside it. Priests, representing shepherds and having with them real dogs and sheep, entered the church. Some of the shepherds pretended to sleep until suddenly they were aroused by the voice of a choir boy, representing an angel, who sang from the pulpit that Jesus is born. Choir boys in the galleries began, "Glory to God in the Highest." The shepherds moved up to the altar to see the Christ Child and departed from the church singing a hymn of praise.¹¹

From the dramatic presentation of these two central features of the Christian faith there gradually developed an interest in presenting in like fashion the events which led up to and which followed these two great happenings. To the Christmas ceremonial were added, among other things, the accounts of the prophecies regarding the Christ Child, the Annunciation, the coming of the Wise Men. To the Easter ceremonial there were added events from the conspiracy against Jesus to the Ascension. Other events were then included, such as the creation of the world, the baptism of Christ, the raising of Lazarus, the final judgment, until the whole course of sacred history was outlined.¹²

However, the presentation of these biblical events in dramatic

¹⁰Clarke, op. cit., p. 6

¹¹Ibid., p. 7.

¹²Alfred Bates, op. cit., pp. 50f.

form should not be understood as an effort at dramatization for its own sake. Craig has pointed out,

the motive force and the motivation of the religious drama were religious and not primarily artistic or dramatic. It happened that certain necessary subjects but relatively few in number received dramatic treatment and were from time to time amplified according to the pattern of the liturgy. . . . The element of dramatic interest probably did not enter to any great degree.¹³

It is quite possible that the clergy, recognizing that a large portion of the people could neither understand the Latin of the church's services nor read the Bible for themselves, may have used this as a method to heighten the meaning of the liturgy and also to teach the people.¹⁴

At this point it may be well to outline briefly the significance of the term "mystery" as it is used in connection with religious drama in England. The use of this term in English religious drama stems from its use in France where the term mystère, or mistère, was used quite widely during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to designate religious drama. There are several divergent views regarding the earlier use of this term. According to one theory mystère is derived from ministère because the clergy, the ministerium, or the ministri Ecclesiae, were the first actors in the plays of this type.¹⁵ Another theory, which seems to have the better support, is that mystère ("religious play") is derived from misterium ("liturgical play") which in turn comes from mysterium or misterium ("liturgical office or

¹³Craig, op. cit., p. 42.

¹⁴Clarke, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 4.

ceremony").¹⁶

In English religious drama a distinction was sometimes made, although not very rigorously nor consistently, between the terms "mystery" and "miracle" plays. The term "mystery" was used to describe those plays which dealt with Scriptural events only,

their purpose being to set forth, with the aid of the prophetic or preparatory history of the Old Testament, and more especially with the fulfilling events of the New, the central mystery of the redemption of the world, as accomplished by the Nativity, the Passion, and the Resurrection of Christ.¹⁷

On the other hand, "miracle play" was the designation given to that play which dealt with the life of a saint or martyr.¹⁸ However, as religious drama developed in England the terms lost their restrictiveness and eventually the term "mystery" was applied to any kind of sacred or religious play.¹⁹

As these dramatic spectacles of biblical events became more popular, the Church gradually lost its control over them. This popularity was due to a number of factors. One of these was the introduction of the use of English. At first the plays were performed in Latin (with most of the story being conveyed through the acting). But in the thirteenth century, after a period of Anglo-Norman or French influence,

¹⁶Karl Young, The Drama of the Medieval Church (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1933), II, 410, 501.

¹⁷Alfred Bates, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁸Clarke, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 5; cf. also Alfred W. Pollard, English Miracles Plays, Moralities, and Interludes (7th Edition; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1923), p. xx; and Edmund K. Chambers, The Medieval Stage (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1903), II, 104.

English was introduced to these plays with the result that there was a considerable increase in their popularity. These plays were no longer presented only in the church, but the minstrels and the popular entertainers of the day entertained at village fairs with acted scenes from Bible stories or saints' legends.

Efforts were made by the Church to draw these plays back within its precincts even to the extent that it tried to meet the competition of the lay performances by outdoing them in attractiveness and pageantry.²⁰ But gradually the Church had to give way and surrender what was once its exclusive property. The laity had always been involved in the performance of these plays, even from the earliest days. For it is most probable that in the smaller towns the clerical staff would not have been large enough to supply all of the characters for the "Office of the Shepherds" for example.²¹ But by the beginning of the thirteenth century the performance of the play was all but given over into the hands of the laity. Although a compromise was attempted around 1300 which allowed the clergy to represent the Nativity and Resurrection in the churches but not to act in the open places,²² "the representation of the miracle plays [by this time] had passed almost entirely into the hands of the laity, and more especially of the great trade guilds."²³ As a result, it can be said of the York plays, for example,

²⁰Clarke, op. cit., p. 11.

²¹Ibid., p. 7.

²²Ibid., p. 12.

²³Ibid., p. 15.

[they] were essentially the plays of the people, they were performed by the shopkeepers and artisans of the city, and with a single exception,²⁴ so far as we know neither the clergy nor the religious houses had part or lot in their production.²⁵

The four cycles that have been chosen for this study, the cycles of York, Towneley, Coventry, and Chester, were certainly not the only cycles in existence during the medieval period. Besides the cycles performed at these four places there were at least thirty other cycles performed in various communities throughout England between the years 1350 and 1500.²⁶ However, the historical significance of the cycles from the four centers named above cannot be minimized. For, as Clarke has observed,

The texts of the plays acted at York, Wakefield [Towneley²⁷], Chester, and Coventry, are the only complete relics we possess of those great series of mystery plays which, between the years 1350 and 1500, were acted all over the country.²⁸

The authorship of these plays is generally attributed to the clergy.²⁹

²⁴The exception is that in 1415 the play of the Purification, usually acted by the hatmakers, the masons, and the laborers, was brought out by the brothers of the Hospital of St. Leonard.

²⁵Clarke, op. cit., p. 26.

²⁶Ibid., p. 15.

²⁷This particular cycle is variously designated as that of Towneley, Widkirk, Woodkirk, or Wakefield. The reason for this is that the fair at which the plays were given was held at Woodkirk in the neighborhood of Wakefield. The guild from Wakefield performed the play. The MS. was believed to have been the property of the Woodkirk Abbey and later became a possession of the Towneley family. Cf. Alfred Bates, op. cit., p. 62. In this study the cycle is designated as the Towneley cycle.

²⁸Clarke, op. cit., p. 15.

²⁹Cargill, op. cit., p. 132, suggests the possibility that the authors were the minstrels employed by the monasteries to attract pilgrims to the shrines and collections of relics.

At least this would be true of the initial composition of the plays; for it is doubtful whether many laymen would have the literary competence to carry out this project. "The honest artisan or shopkeeper, who could scarcely learn his allotted part, was certainly unable to compose the text of a spiritual play."³⁰ Internal evidence is cited in support of the clerical authorship of the York cycle.

That he [the author] belonged to one of the religious houses of the North in the Yorkshire district may well be hazarded, on account of the knowledge of Scripture, and especially the careful concordance of the narrative from the Gospels shown in the plays.³¹

But as far as the later editions of the plays are concerned it is most probable that many other people contributed to the revisions and rewritings of the original texts. The comment of Gayley is sound.

We may be sure . . . that the craft plays as we have them are the result of collaboration through generations by the secular clergy of the collegiate churches, parish clerks, town clergy, town clerks, secular clerks of the universities, and grammar school masters and by the occasional guild playwright and the craftsman improviser.³²

There is an apparent relationship between the cycles of York and of Towneley. Five of the plays which the two cycles have in common are almost identical, even to the wording.³³

³⁰Alfred Bates, op. cit., p. 43.

³¹Lucy Toulmin Smith, editor, York Plays (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1885), p. xlv.

³²Charles Mills Gayley, Plays of our Forefathers and Some of the Traditions upon which They were Founded (New York: Duffield & Co., 1907), p. 87.

³³"Departure of the Israelites," "Christ in the Temple," "The Descent to Hell," "The Resurrection," and "The Last Judgment." There is a suggestion by Clarke, op. cit., p. 27, that the guild from Wakefield (i.e., the performers of the Towneley cycle) may have performed the plays at York.

As a general characterization of the Towneley plays it may be said that they exhibit less reverence and feeling than do the other cycles. This is noted, for example, in the language used by Cain and his servant in the play "Cain and Abel," by the manner of the nagging by Noah's wife in "Noah's Flood," and by the farcical nature of the Pagina Secunda Pastorum.

The York text is considered to be one of the most reliable examples extant of an entire cycle as it actually was performed. The York Cycle "is, as a whole, the most complete English collection, the only known full text that we are sure was played by the crafts at the Corpus Christi festival."³⁴ This text is also noted for its examples of the early English type of alliteration. Hence in the play "Conspiracy to Take Jesus" one of the officials says to Judas,

Say, bittelbrowed briber,
Why blowes thou such boste?
Full false in thy face in faith can I fynde
Thou art combered in curstnesse
And caris to this coste;
To marre men of myght
Haste thou marked in thy mynde.³⁵

The Coventry Cycle is perhaps the most obviously didactic of the four cycles. It is the only cycle to include a play dealing with the giving of the Law. It also appears to be especially concerned with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and with the honor due to the Virgin Mary.³⁶ This didactic tendency has prompted at least one commentator

³⁴Smith, op. cit., p. xliii.

³⁵Ibid., p. 226.

³⁶Pollard, op. cit., p. xxxix.

to suggest that this cycle was not performed by town guilds, but rather by some religious order, possibly the Grey Friars.

The plays, as might be expected if they were acted by ecclesiastics, have a higher and more religious tone than do those of the other series; the humour is less exuberant and altogether the plays seem to have been performed with some idea of illustrating to the people the great truths of the Christian religion.³⁷

The Chester Cycle has been characterized by Pollard in these words:

There is less in the Chester plays to jar on modern feelings than in any other of the cycles. The humour is kept more within bounds, the religious tone is far higher, and though the plays are not spoilt by any obtrusive didacticism such as we find in the Coventry Cycle, the speeches of the Expositor at the end of each play show that a real effort was made to serve the religious objective to which all miracle plays were ostensibly directed.³⁸

It may be well to conclude this chapter with some remarks concerning the end of the cycles and their performance. Various causes have been cited to explain why the mystery cycles declined toward the end of the sixteenth century. One possibility is that the people themselves grew tired of the presentations. Another is that the various trade guilds found that the financial obligation of supporting their annual presentation was more than their treasury could bear. But from the evidence that is available it would appear that these were not the reasons. Rather, since the evidence indicates that the people were willing to attend and to sponsor the plays, the cause for the decline came from an outside force, namely, from a government that was being

³⁷Clarke, op. cit., p. 44.

³⁸Pollard, op. cit., p. xxvii.

converted to Protestantism. These plays were considered by this government to be papal forms of religious expression and attitude.

Records indicate that contrary to the expressed will of the authorities the people still petitioned that their religious dramas be continued.³⁹ Copies of plays were required to be submitted to the local authorities for study and they were simply not returned. In other cases where copies of the plays remained in the hands of the people the authorities strongly advised against the performance of these religious plays. From an unpublished document preserved in the diocesan registry at York, dated May, 1576, there is indicated that the Queen's Commission had sent a letter to the people of Wakefield, who were contemplating the performance of a Corpus Christi play (a play similar to those of the cycles), telling them that no play should be given

wherein the ma(t)ye[?] of God the Father, God the Sonne, or God the Holie Ghoste or the administration of either the Sacraments of Baptisme or of the Lordes Supper be counterfeyted or represented, or any thinge plaied which tende to the maintenaunce of superstition and idolatrie or which be contrary to the lawes of God and[sic] or of the realme.⁴⁰

In another instance Dean Hutten, who in 1568 served under Elizabeth as a member of Her Majesty's Commission for Ecclestial Causes in the North, advised the people of York against presenting the "Creed Play"

³⁹This feeling also extended northward to Scotland where the players were so obstinate in their devotion to the pageants that it was necessary to threaten a refusal of baptism for their children in order to bring them "to promise in tyme cuming neuir to mell with sik thingis again." Anna Jean Mill, Medieval Plays in Scotland (University of St. Andrews: Oxford University Press, 1927), pp. 275f.

⁴⁰Harold C. Gardiner, Mysteries End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage, in Yale Studies in English (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), CIII, 78.

by saying,

as I find so manie things that I muche like because of thi anti-
quities, so I see manie things that I cannot allow because they
be disagreeing from the sinceritie of the gospell, the which
things, yf they should either be altogether cancelled or altered
into other matters, the whole drift of the play should be altered,
and therefore I dare not put my pen unto it, thoughte in
good will I assure you yf I were worthie to give your lordshippe
. . . counsel, suerlie mine advice should be that it should not
be plaied, ffor though it was plawisible to years agoes, and wold
now also of the ignorant sort be well liked, yet now in the
happy time of the gospell, I knowe the learned will mislik it,
and how the state will beare it, I know not.⁴¹

Hence the conclusion which Gardiner reaches on the basis of such evidence as this is:

We think that the just conclusion is that the power which was really working for the ultimate extinction of the religious stage was none other than the crown itself, whose motives were the extirpation of the old customs and practices under the cry of "superstition and idolatry."⁴²

⁴¹Quoted by Gardiner, op. cit., p. 73, from R. Davis, Extracts from the Municipal records of the City of York in the Reigns of Edward IV, Edward V, and Richard III (York, 1843), p. 276.

⁴²Gardiner, op. cit., p. 77.

CHAPTER III

THE PERFORMANCE OF THE MYSTERY CYCLES

The mystery cycles were presented by the trade guilds of the city, but the production of the plays was under the general jurisdiction of the city government. Before any trade guild could present its contribution to the cycle it had to obtain the approval of the municipality. However, simply to indicate to the city its willingness to present a play was not the only requirement that the guild had to meet. In York, for example, civic regulations stipulated that if the guild failed to present their play at the proper time or if the acting proved to be of an inferior quality the guild was subject to a fine.¹

For the most part the guilds were quite willing to assume these obligations; for the performance of a play in the cycle was a jealously guarded privilege of the guilds. In certain instances the performance of a particular play became a distinguishing mark of that guild. In Coventry, for example, the guilds felt such a loyalty to their own particular play that their members were not permitted to act in any other play except their own.²

An effort seems to have been made by the guild to select a biblical story for portrayal which had some association with the type of work done by the guild. Thus, for example, in the York cycle the "Flight

¹Infra, Appendix A.

²Harold C. Gardiner, Mysteries End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage, in Yale Studies in English (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), CIII, 37.

into Egypt" was presented by the Marchalls, the men who shod horses, the "Last Supper" by the bakers, and "Noah and the Flood" by the fishermen and mariners. Sometimes the display of occupational skills became a dominant feature of the presentation.

In the rendering of the play the guilds took even more pride than in its subject matter or its mounting. It was not only a question of costumes and outfits, but also of action and speech; not only whether Noah's ark, when finished and filled with all its animals, produced an illusion, but also whether in constructing the ark Noah showed himself a skillful carpenter; whether the crew of the ark, during the flood, conducted themselves as real sailors or merely as landlubbers. The smiths, or whatever craftsmen performed at the play of the Crucifixion, made it a point of honor to affix the Savior on the cross in a workmanlike manner, and thus the details of their trade, with all its difficulties and accidents, come to a severe trial on such occasions, making the dialogue entirely subordinate. And here the influence of the actors is seen upon the writer, who, to please them, sometimes inserts in a prominent position what is merely incidental, and at great length places the trite and vulgar side by side with the noble and unique.³

The cost of the plays was borne by the guild treasury. In certain instances the guilds were forced to borrow money for the plays' production.⁴ However, in most cases this was not necessary since the guilds employed various methods to raise the needed money. When an individual became a master craftsman or when he first entered a trade he was assessed a certain fee, part of which went specifically for the support of the play.⁵ In other cases a yearly rate, varying in the

³Alfred Bates, editor, Drama, Its History, Literature, and Influence on Civilization (London: Historical Publishing Company, 1903), IV, 53.

⁴Gardiner, op. cit., p. 43.

⁵Ibid., p. 34.

different guilds from a penny to fourpence, was levied on every member.⁶ It is recorded that the average cost for producing a guild play during this time was £3.7

Careful preparations were made for these plays. On occasion, when the guild lacked a qualified director among its own membership, it employed an outsider skilled in stagecraft to produce their play for them.⁸ At least in one year (1476) in York try-outs for the play were begun in Lent--three months before the plays were to be given.⁹ In the same year it was ordained in York that every year a committee of the most able players of the city examine all the players, plays, and pageants of all the guilds involved in the Corpus Christi festival. Those that were qualified in person and in skill to uphold the honor of the city and the praise of the crafts should be admitted. Others should be disqualified.¹⁰

The actors were paid for their services. However, the wage was determined by the length of the role rather than by its importance. There was usually a general utility man who filled a variety of roles. "Thus at Coventry a man named Farston got 4d. for hanging Judas, 4d. for cock-crowing, and 5d. for setting the world on fire in the last

⁶Sidney W. Clarke, The Miracle Play in England (London: Wm. Andrews Co., 1897), p. 57.

⁷Gardiner, op. cit., p. 35.

⁸Clarke, op. cit., p. 69.

⁹Gardiner, op. cit., p. 92.

¹⁰Lucy Toulmin Smith, York Plays (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1885), p. xxxvii.

scene of all."¹¹

On the day of the performance¹² the actors and all others involved in the production were obliged to be at their places between four and five o'clock in the morning. Then heralds or vexillatores would ride through the city reading the "Bans" which formed a type of prologue to the plays themselves. Such an example of the "Bans" has been preserved from the production of the Chester plays in 1600.

Reverende lordes and laydyes all
That at this tyme here assembled bee,
By this messange understande you shall
That some tymes there was a mayor of this citie
Sir John Arnway, Knyghte, who most worthely
Contented himselfe to set out in plays
The devise of one Done Rondall, monk of Chester Abbey.

This moonke, moonke-like, in Scripture well seene,
In stories travilled with the beste sorte,
In pagentes set forth apparently to all eyne
The olde and newe testament, with livelye comfort,
Interminglinge therwith, onely to make sporte,
Some thinges not warranted by any writt,
Which to gladd the hearers he woulde men to take yt.

As in this citie divers yeares the have bene set out,
Soe at this time of Pentecost,¹² called Whitsontyde,
Although to all the city followe labour and coste,
Yet God giving leave that tyme shall you, in plays,
For three dayes together, begyninge on Mondays,
See these pageants played to the best of their skill;
When to supplye all wants shalbe noe wantes of good will.

This worthy Knight, Arnway, then mayor of this citie,
This order take, as declare to you I shall,

¹¹Clarke, op. cit., p. 68.

¹²The cycle in Chester was presented over a three day period from Monday through Wednesday of Pentecost week. In other communities the plays were presented on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, which was also the day of the Festival of Corpus Christi. Since this day was one of the longest of the year, it lent itself quite well to a day-long presentation of the whole cycle of religious plays.

That by 24 occupations, artes, crafts, or misterie¹³
 These pageants should be played, after breese rehearsall;
 For everye pageante a carriage to be provyded withall:
 In which sorte we porpose, this Whitsontyde,
 Our pageantes into three partes to devyde.¹⁴

The plays themselves were performed on stages or "pageants" which consisted of a wooden and iron framework mounted on four or six wheels.¹⁵ It was divided into an upper and a lower section; the upper one served as the stage, while the lower one was used as a dressing room. Some of these pageants had a raised platform at the back of the stage which was employed when the play required more than one scene. In other instances the stage and the ground in front of the stage were used for the two scenes.¹⁶

The scenery used was of the most simple type. Houses and castles were represented by simple square structures. Scenes and incidents relevant to the play were often painted on tapestries which were hung on the rear wall of the stage. Stage effects that were employed included the use of a barrel of stones to produce the effect of an earthquake. The Hell Mouth was an important feature of the play on the Judgment. It was generally constructed in the form of a square, embattled tower whose entrance was a gaping dragon's head. When the jaws opened fire and smoke, produced by braziers and bellows, poured

¹³This use of the term "misterie" suggests another possible source for the name "mystery plays," namely, the use of "mystery" in the sense of trade or craft.

¹⁴Quoted by Clarke, *op. cit.*, pp. 63f.

¹⁵For a contemporary account of the pageant, see Appendix B.

¹⁶Smith, *op. cit.*, p. liv.

out. At the same time horns blew and imps jumped out to drag in the wicked.¹⁷ The costumes used were rather gaudy in appearance, particularly those of Herod and of the devil. The saints and holy persons very often were distinguished by their gilt hair and beards. Jesus was represented as wearing a long sheepskin. In general, "the dresses, as was long the custom on the English stage, aimed rather at splendor than appropriateness."¹⁸

¹⁷Clarke, op. cit., p. 74.

¹⁸Alfred W. Pollard, English Miracle Plays, Moralities, and Interludes (7th Edition; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1923), p. xxvii.

CHAPTER IV

THE CONTENT OF THE MYSTERY CYCLES

The Scope

The scope of the cycles encompasses the presentation of biblical history from creation to judgment. The number of individual plays in each cycle varies from twenty-four in the Chester Cycle to forty-eight in the York Cycle.¹ Altogether there are fifteen biblical stories which are common to all four cycles and appear as separate plays in each. They are the following: The Creation, The Sacrifice of Cain and Abel, The Building of the Ark by Noah and the Flood, The Annunciation, The Birth of Jesus, The Coming of the Magi, The Massacre of the Innocents, The Raising of Lazarus, The Agony and Betrayal, The Crucifixion, The Harrowing of Hell, The Resurrection, The Travelers to Emmaus, The Ascension, and The Judgment. It has been suggested by Gayley² that the content of the cycles falls under five different categories: (1) The Creation and the Old Testament history; (2) The Nativity; (3) The Ministry; (4) The Passion; (5) The History of the Living Church, or perhaps more accurately, the Account of the Last Times. Following this five-fold division it is noted that the Coventry Cycle has seven plays in the first category; twelve in the

¹For a complete listing of all the plays see Appendices C, D, E, and F.

²Charles Mills Gayley, Plays of Our Forefathers and Some of the Traditions upon which They were Founded (New York: Duffield & Co., 1907), pp. 118ff.

second; two in the third; seven in the fourth; and four in the fifth. The Towneley has eight in the first; nine in the second; three in the third; eleven in the fourth; and one in the fifth. The York Cycle has eleven in the first; eight in the second; five in the third; nineteen in the fourth; and five in the fifth. Inasmuch as the second, third, and fourth categories include one hundred two of the total of one hundred forty-six plays found in the cycles, it can be seen that the main emphasis in the historical survey which these plays presented was on the person of Jesus, His birth, work and death.

The Sources and Their Use

In describing the sources upon which the playwrights based these dramas it should be noted, first of all, that the Holy Scripture according to the Vulgate version was the pre-eminent source. The plays, generally speaking, adhere quite closely to the central theme of the biblical story and do not make extended use of legends or apocryphal writings. These medieval writers seem to show a considerable restraint in selecting apocryphal writings to enliven the personal history of Jesus.³ And yet, this is not to deny the fact that legends of the saints and apocryphal writings were used, and very deliberately. The authors of these plays were not concerned about a completely literal and completely accurate reproduction of the biblical story. The dramas were not designed to be photographic reproductions of the original story. Rather, the authors were concerned about conveying to

³Katherine Bates, The English Religious Drama (New York: MacMillan & Co., 1893), p. 173.

the audience the spirit and the emotion of the scene as well as the plot. They also had in mind the teaching role which the drama could play. As dramatists, they could not ignore the element of comic relief which is quite essential to a dramatic production. For these reasons the authors would include such things as incidents from daily life, the apocryphal legends, and inventions of their own fertile imaginations.

Miss Smith has summed up this observation regarding the use of incidents from daily life in these words:

Touches of current life and usage here and there stand out amid the ancient story; the carpenters' tools and measure used by Noah, as well as those employed at the Crucifixion; the bitter cold weather at the Nativity, telling of a truly northern Christmas; the quaint offerings of the shepherds; the ruin of the poor by murraine in the account of the Ten Plagues; the drinking between Pilate and his wife.⁴

It is very understandable that the children in the audience at the York play about the Nativity could readily identify the gift of a broach with a tin bell, a horn spoon ("which can hold forty peas"), and some nuts threaded on a ribbon which the shepherds offered to the Christ Child⁵ as trinkets which they themselves had received from their parents. Or the mariner in the crowd was sure to watch intently as Noah cast the lead from the ark to measure the depth of the water.⁶

⁴Lucy Toulmin Smith, editor, York Plays (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1885), p. lvii. Hereafter when reference is made to the historical introduction of this book it is designated as Smith, op. cit. When reference is made to the text of the plays within this book it is designated as York, with the number of the play supplied in Roman numerals.

⁵York, XV, lines 103ff.

⁶Ibid., IX, line 19.

The New Testament Apocrypha are used quite freely as a source for the content of the plays.⁷ In the Coventry Cycle at least eight of the plays have sections which are paraphrases from the New Testament Apocrypha.⁸ Play XIII of the York Cycle, "Joseph's Trouble with Mary," contains episodes from a number of apocryphal legends including episodes from "The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew," "History of Joseph the Carpenter," "Protevangelium or Gospel of James," and the "Nativity of Mary." A less direct source was Speculum Humanae Salvationis which is termed "a very popular religious picture-book of the fourteenth century."⁹ Pilate's dream in York plays XXX and XXXI comes from the "Gospel of Nicodemus" as does the account of the bowing of the standards in York XXXIII. York XXXIV contains an allusion to the legend of the Holy Tree.¹⁰ In general the apocryphal legends employed in these cycles are those relating to the marriage of Joseph and Mary and the later life of the Virgin Mary.¹¹

It was in using his own creative imagination that the playwright most often "violated" the limits of the biblical source. He did this either by expanding the information supplied by Scripture or by inventing entirely new incidents or people. And again, in doing this the

⁷Smith, op. cit., p. xlvi.

⁸William Hone, Ancient Mysteries Described (London: Wm. Reenes, 1823), p. iv.

⁹Smith, op. cit., pp. xlvii.

¹⁰This is the story of the tree which, having sprung from a seed on Adam's tongue, played a role in the lives of Moses, David, and Solomon and which was finally cut down to be fashioned into the Cross.

¹¹Katherine Bates, op. cit., p. 173.

playwright was displaying neither his ignorance nor disregard of the Scripture. But rather he was endeavoring to present a work which could be, at one and the same time, dramatic, instructive, and interesting.

For example, in the delineation of the biblical characters the writers expressed some freedom of thought. The Towneley Cain, for example, is presented within the character framework which the Scripture suggests, but in a much more complete fashion than does the biblical account.

He is a Yorkshire peasant, malicious and niggardly, higgling with God about every sheaf in the sacrifice, and animated with the desire of cheating God, if possible. He has, besides, a surly, easily irritated disposition, and a clownish rudeness; he is a master at reviling, cursing, ribaldry, and likes to show his cleverness on the smallest excuse. . . . a grim, sarcastic humor lends to these qualities the proper relish, and in this mood he spares God just as little as he does the righteous Abel.¹²

It is in the development of the character of Noah's wife that the authors exhibit some of their inventive imagination. She is generally presented as a nagging, sharp-tongued wife who never bothered to find out exactly what her husband was so busily engaged in building during the many years prior to the flood and who, when the rain begins to fall and her husband encourages her to enter the ark, is likely to exclaim, as she does in the Chester Cycle,

By Christ! Not or I see more needs,
Though thou stand all the day and stare.¹³

¹²Alfred Bates, editor, Drama, Its History, Literature, and Influence on Civilization (London: Historical Publishing Co., 1903), IV, 65.

¹³Herman Deimling, editor, The Chester Plays (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truebner & Co., 1893), play III, lines 103-104. Hereafter designated as Chester D.

A variation of approach to the same Bible story in the various cycles can be seen in the story of Abraham and Isaac. In the Coventry Cycle Isaac accepts the news of his impending death resolutely and with little emotion and he immediately says,

All ready father even at your will
I do your bidding as is reasonable.¹⁴

In Towneley Cycle Isaac does not take the news as easily, but insists upon being informed of the wrong that he has done. And thus the pathos of the situation is heightened.

Isaac: What haue I done, fader, what haue I saide?

Abraham: Truly, no kyns ill to me.

Isaac: And thus gyltles shall be arayde [slain].

Abraham: Now, good son, let sich wordis be.¹⁵

In the York series Isaac recognizes, that although he agrees with the necessity of his own sacrifice, his flesh might rebel against the idea and so he tells his father,

Ther-fore is beste that ye me bynde
In bandis faste, boothe fute and hande,
Nowe whillis I am in myght and mynde,
So sall ye saffely make afferrande.¹⁶

In the Chester play on this subject Isaac is the one who offers comfort to his distressed father as he inquires why his father is expressing

¹⁴K. S. Block, editor, Ludus Coventriae or the Plaie called Corpus Christi (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1922), play V, lines 175-176, (translated into modern English). Hereafter designated as Coventry.

¹⁵George England and Alfred W. Pollard, editors, The Towneley Plays (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1897), play IV, lines 205-208. Hereafter designated as Towneley.

¹⁶York, I, lines 213-216 (transliterated).

sorrow:

O deere father, wherfore? wherfore?
Syth I must nedes be dead,

And he goes on to make one plea:

Of one thing I wold you praye:
Since I must die the death this daye,
As few strokes as you maye,
When you smyte of my heade.¹⁷

This variety of approaches used in this story of Abraham and Isaac points up the tendency of the writers of these plays to take the basic facts of the biblical story and through the exercise of their imagination to heighten the dramatic impact of the scene.

Another example of this is found in the York account of the Passion in which the author conveys the brutality of the soldiers with stark realism:

4 Sol. He's bound fast. Beat on with hard slashes.

1 Sol. Leap in now, and lace him with lashes
And lay on this liar to flay him.

2 Sol. Let us drive at him fiercely with dashes;
All red with our whips we'll array him
And rend him.

3 Sol. For my part I'm pressed for to pay him.

4 Sol. Yaha! Send him sorrow; assay him.

1 Sol. Take him till I've time to attend him.

2 Sol. Swing to this pillar; too swiftly he sweats.

3 Sol. Sweat, may be sure, for force of our flails.

4 Sol. Rush on the rascal: revive him with whips.

1 Sol. Revive him, I reckon, with rods and with raps.

¹⁷Chester D, IV, lines 343-348.

2 Sol. For all that we do, this niggard he naps.

3 Sol. Waken him, then, with wind of our whips.

4 Sol. Now fling to this flatterer with flaps.¹⁸

.....

1 Sol. Lord, how like you this lark, and this lore that
we learn you?¹⁹

The play on the Crucifixion in the same series also exhibits this vivid realism. While the cross is still lying on the ground, Jesus is placed upon it. Each of the four soldiers grasps either a hand or a foot of Jesus and pulls until the extremities of Jesus reach the nail holes previously bored. Then the soldiers plan to raise the cross, making much ado about lifting such a heavy weight. They start, then pause to rest, and then struggle once more to raise it:

4 Sol. Now raise him nimbly
And set him by this mortice here,
And let him fall down at one blow,
For sure that pain would have no peer
Heave up - let down! All his bones so
are sundered every where²⁰

The use of the authors' imagination in a slightly different fashion to achieve dramatic effect is seen in the Chester play, "The Slaughter of the Innocents," in which Herod is informed that among the children slain by his soldiers there was included one of his own sons. Upon hearing this news Herod dies²¹ as though this act of ironic justice was

¹⁸York, XXXIII, lines 352-367 (translated).

¹⁹Ibid., line 374.

²⁰Ibid., XXXV, lines 219-224 (translated).

²¹Chester D, X, line 432.

more than he could bear.

In the York play which includes the "Remorse of Judas" the author has Judas, in a pathetic scene, come to Pilate to beg him to free Jesus:

My tidings are troublesome, I tell you,
Sir Pilate, therefore must I pray--
My Master, whom once I would sell you,
Good lord, let him go on his way.²²

There are numerous examples within the cycles of what seem to be efforts to instruct the audience. One of these instances occurs in the Towneley Cycle in the play describing the meeting of the young Jesus and the doctors in the Temple. Here Jesus makes a detailed recitation of the Ten Commandments. Another technique may likewise be didactic in intent, namely, that of reiterating past events and bringing together in one story various events which properly do not belong there. Thus in the York play on the judgment the account of the Crucifixion is repeated twice.²³

An example of bringing together various events into one story is found in the York play describing the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. In this play the porter who gives the disciples permission to borrow the ass spreads throughout the city the news of Christ's coming. As the townspeople gather together to await His approach they talk to one another of the reports of miracles that Jesus has done. They speak of the feeding of the five thousand, the changing of the water into wine, the fact that Jesus was able to make corn grow without the use of a

²²York, XXXII, lines 152-155.

²³Ibid., XLVIII, line 27 and lines 253ff.

plow,²⁴ the raising of the dead, and the fact that Jesus was the promised prophet.²⁵

In this same play still another approach is used to convey a body of information to the audience. This occurs as Jesus is riding to Jerusalem on the ass. Along the way He meets, first of all, the blind man (lines 288f.) whose story is recorded in the twentieth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Then Jesus meets the lame man (line 358), possibly the one spoken of in the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. Finally Jesus meets Zaccheus (line 392) from chapter nineteen of the Gospel according to St. Luke.

As the concluding statement of this section on the sources of the plays and their uses, the judgment of Katherine Bates is appropriate:

The miracle cycle, then, has for its fundamental material the Christian faith, crudely comprehended, given, with startling realism, personal embodiment and physical environment, sprinkled over with legends and anachronistic touches of rural English life, yet still in essential feature the Christian history.²⁶

The Various Teachings

Creation and the fall

The plays dealing with the creation generally begin with a short speech by God in which He declares His character. For example, the Coventry Cycle has God declare these words to the audience:

²⁴Ibid., XXV, lines 137-138. Possibly this is a misunderstanding of the Parable of the Sower.

²⁵Ibid., lines 134-154.

²⁶Katherine Bates, op. cit., p. 175.

I am oo [one] god . in personys thre
Knyt in oo substawns.²⁷

The actual acts of the creation follow the biblical account quite closely. In the Coventry Cycle God concludes the six days of creation and on the seventh imposes the rest and the worship of the Sabbath:

And all who that cease of laboring here
The seventh day without fear
And worship me in good manner
They shall in heaven have endless peace.²⁸

The position of the angels and particularly of Lucifer is outlined at some length in most of the cycles. There were originally nine (York) or ten (Towneley) orders of angels. In the latter cycle it is noted that one tenth of each angelic order fell with Lucifer.²⁹ At first Lucifer is accorded considerable respect by the other angels. The cherubim, for example, declare that they have been created bright by God, but that God has made Lucifer even brighter.³⁰ Encouraged by such praise Lucifer dares to sit on God's throne in His absence, much to the despair of the majority of the angels.³¹ And because of this rebellion against God Lucifer is sent to hell; and at his departure the earth becomes dark.³²

God proposes to make man so that he might be a creature to bring

²⁷Coventry, I, lines 12-13.

²⁸Ibid., lines 135-138 (transliterated).

²⁹Towneley, I, line 257.

³⁰Ibid., line 68.

³¹Ibid., line 103.

³²York, I, line 148. This idea stems undoubtedly from the etymology of Lucifer, "light-bringer."

praise to God, to worship and to love God always. But in order to counteract man's pride God declares that He will form man out of the dust of the earth.³³ Man's state of bliss was very short-lived. Adam and Eve were placed into the Garden of Eden in early morning; by noon they had fallen.³⁴ The fall was the result of the evil machination of Satan. Several of the cycles describe the motivation which prompted Satan to tempt man to sin. In the York series Satan is presented as being jealous over the fact that God intends to take on the nature of man rather than that of an angel. Hence Satan approaches Eve in order to upset God's purpose.³⁵

In the Chester account it is because of envy that Satan seeks man's fall; for man has been given mastery over the earthly paradise. Satan says,

By Belzabub! Shall I never blyn[stop].
 Tyll I may make him by some synne
 From that place for to tyn
 And trespace as did I.³⁶

In the Coventry Cycle, after he had led Eve into sin, Satan confesses to God that it was envy which led him to do this, envy because man should live above the sky where he once lived.³⁷ This seems to suggest that the Garden of Eden is thought of in some instances as being located in heaven, or at least in a different locale than on this

³³Ibid., III, lines 19-66.

³⁴Ibid., VI, lines 89-90.

³⁵Ibid., V, lines 1-22.

³⁶Chester D., II, lines 173-176.

³⁷Coventry, II, lines 317ff.

earth. Support is given to this possibility by the reference in the York Cycle in which God announces to an angel that because of their sins Adam and Eve are to be banished to middle-earth.³⁸

But as they are banished from Paradise the Seraphim with the flaming sword offers hope to the sinners. They will not enter Paradise again

Til a child of a maid be born
And upon the rode rent and torn
To save all that you have lost
Your wealth for to restore.³⁹

The Chester Cycle makes specific reference to the Protevangel as God says to Satan:

And enmytie betwixt yow twoo
Hence forth I will make.
Betwixt they seade and hers also
I shall excyte sorrow and woe;
To breake thy heade and be thy foe
She shall have maystry aye.⁴⁰

The York series on the creation and the fall is noteworthy because of its almost complete lack of a reference to hope or promise following the fall into sin. The group of plays on this topic simply ends with Eve sorrowfully accepting the responsibility for the fall.⁴¹

Original sin

There are several references within the plays that stress the idea of original sin. In the Coventry play on the Purification Simeon hears

³⁸York, V, line 66.

³⁹Coventry, II, lines 374-377 (transliterated).

⁴⁰Chester D, II, lines 303-308.

⁴¹York, VI, lines 156ff.

the angels say of Jesus:

The dyrknes of orygynal synne
He xal [shall] make lyght and clarefye.⁴²

In the Chester Cycle God announces to Noah after the flood:

Warry Earth will I no more
For mans synne that greves me sore;
For of youth man full yore
Has byn enclyned to syne.⁴³

In the play which relates the arrival of the Wise Men at the court of Herod one of the doctors of Herod's court finds a prophecy of Daniel which says that a holy one should come whose purpose it would be

Out of Satans band to delyuer all mankind,
Whom sinne original pitiously did bynde.⁴⁴

Regarding the question as to the reason why the blind man was thus afflicted John asks Jesus:

Was sinne the cause originall,
Wherin we be conceived all,
That this blynd man was brought in thrall,
Or his forfathers offence?⁴⁵

Person of Christ

The two natures of Christ, His human and His divine, are both set forth in the cycles. This is perhaps most clearly indicated by a passage from the play in which the young Jesus meets with the doctors in the Temple and explains to them the nature of His origin. Jesus

⁴²Coventry, XIX, lines 47-48.

⁴³Chester D, III, lines 317-320.

⁴⁴Ibid., VIII, lines 287-288.

⁴⁵Ibid., XIII, lines 48-51.

tells them,

I am of dobyl byrth and dobyl lenage.⁴⁶

Occasionally apocryphal miracles are introduced to lend support to the supernatural quality of Jesus' nature. Thus when Mary and Joseph approach the Temple for Mary's Purification Simeon notes with wonder that the Temple bells begin ringing by themselves.⁴⁷

But this divine nature of Jesus was not intended to be revealed to Satan. In order that the fact that it was the Son of God who was to be born of Mary might be concealed from Satan, God so arranged that a human being, Joseph, should take Mary as his wife. Thus Satan would be misled.⁴⁸

There is a particular preoccupation in these plays with both the original conception and the virgin birth. These happenings are closely associated by the authors with the two natures of Christ Himself. Thus it is considered to be beyond human understanding that God should unite in Mary the three elements of Godhead, maidenhood, and man.⁴⁹ In the Purification play Simeon opens the play by musing to himself on the coming Savior and the difficulty of believing the words of the prophet who said that a virgin would conceive without the help of man. Therefore Simeon determined that he would scrape away the words "a virgin" from the page and replace them with the words "a good woman." Shortly

⁴⁶Coventry, XXI, line 157.

⁴⁷Towneley, XVII, line 114.

⁴⁸York, XII, lines 25f.

⁴⁹Ibid., lines 105-108.

after he discovers to his amazement that the words "a virgin" have returned to the page in bright red letters.⁵⁰

A veiled threat for those who question the virgin birth is included in the Chester play on the Nativity in which one of the midwives attending Mary doubts the story of the virgin birth. However, as she is following the stage direction, Tunc Salome tentabit tangere Miriam in sexu secreto, she is convinced of her error as her hand is paralyzed in mid-air.⁵¹

Salvation

The teachings regarding salvation can be classified roughly into two groups: teachings regarding how salvation was achieved for men; and teachings regarding the way in which salvation is obtained by the individual.

First, regarding the bringing of salvation to men, it is taught in these plays that above all else this was an action originating with God. In the Prophets' play of Towneley, in which the prophecies of the coming Messiah are retold, Daniel says,

Therfor wyll god apon vs rew[have mercy],
And his son downe send
Into erth, flesh to take,
That is all for oure sake,
Oure trespas to amend.⁵²

The act of salvation which Jesus was to perform included the overcoming of the sin of Adam. On the cross Jesus cries out to His heavenly Father,

⁵⁰Chester D, XI, lines 1-59.

⁵¹Ibid., VI, lines 545-560.

⁵²Towneley VII, lines 224-228.

Here to death I oblige me
From that sin [i.e. Adam's] to save mankind.⁵³

What was actually involved in overcoming the sin of Adam is explained by the Expositor of the Chester Cycle, who acts as a type of commentator on the happenings in the drama. He declares, on the basis of St. Gregory, that in the Temptation Jesus overcame Satan by resisting the same three sins to which Adam fell victim, namely, gluttony, vain-glory, and covetousness.⁵⁴

Christ's work of salvation also takes on the aspect of a sacrifice. The infant born of Mary, according to a doctor at the court of Herod, was later to save mankind by

Offering hym selfe in sacrifice for mankindes offence,
Which from heuen was exiled through his greate negligence.⁵⁵

There is considerable stress placed on the fact that Jesus' action was that done by the innocent for those who were guilty. Jesus says that He suffered and died not for His guilt, but for mankind's need.⁵⁶ At the tomb of Jesus Mary laments that Jesus, the innocent, had suffered and died for her wrongs.

With-uten gilte the trewe was tane,
For trespas did he neuere none,
The woundes he suffered many one
Was for my misse.
It was my dede he was for-slayne
And no-tyng his.⁵⁷

⁵³York, XXXV, lines 53-54 (paraphrased).

⁵⁴Chester D, XII, lines 162-208.

⁵⁵Ibid., VIII, lines 294-295.

⁵⁶York, XLVIII, line 248.

⁵⁷Ibid., XXXVIII, lines 276-281 (transliterated).

Jesus, upon rising from the grave, calls upon man to view his wounds which were endured for them.

Thus was I spylt, man, for thi gylt,
And not for myne.⁵⁸

In describing the manner in which people are to receive the benefits of the salvation which Jesus has achieved for them, the cycles use many different approaches. Certainly, an important feature is a contemplation of the suffering and death of Jesus. Before His Ascension Jesus told His disciples to tell all people that would accept baptism and would truly believe

Mi dethe and rysyng
And also myn vpstevynyng,
And also myn agane-commynng,
Thay shalbe saue suerly.⁵⁹

While hanging on the cross Jesus calls upon men to look on him:

That man who has mind to repent,
Look here, and good heed to me take.
On the rood am I tortured and rent,
Thou sinful of soul, for thy sake.
For thy misdeeds amends do I make,
For thy sake this torment I know;
This woe for thy trespass I take;
What man greater loving could show
than I?⁶⁰

In the Towneley play on the Resurrection there is included the element of mercy on God's part which prompts Him to extend to the sinner the promise of forgiveness. In this play Jesus points to His wounds as evidence of His love for men, and thus He incites men to love Him and

⁵⁸Towneley, XXVI, lines 266-267.

⁵⁹Ibid., XXIX, lines 122-125.

⁶⁰York, XXXVI, lines 118-126 (translated).

ask for the mercy that cleanses them from sin.

If thou thy lyfe in syn haue led,
 Mercy to ask be not adred;
 The leste droppe I for the [thee] bled
 Myght clenys the [thee] soyn [soon?]
 All the syn the world with in
 If thou had done.⁶¹

Numerous examples of statements showing that salvation is based on faith can be cited from these dramas. Lazarus, upon being raised from the dead, exclaims that all who truly trust in Jesus shall never die.⁶² Jesus, as He is entering Jerusalem, says to the blind man,

Loke vppes nowe with chere blythely,
 Thy faith shall thee saue.⁶³

In much the same fashion Jesus says to the woman who anointed Him,

Therefore, woman, witherly,
 For thou hast loved so tenderly,
 All thy synnes now forgewe I;
 Belefe hath saved thee.⁶⁴

Occasionally there is a mingling of mercy and contrition as the basis on which forgiveness is extended. Thus in the case of the woman taken in adultery Jesus says to her,

Though that your sins be never so great,
 For them be sad and ask mercy,
 Some of my Father's grace you may get
 With the least tear weeping out of your eye.
 My Father me sent the man to buy,
 All the ransom myself must pay;
 For love of you myself will die.

⁶¹Towneley, XXVI, lines 298-303.

⁶²York, XXIV, lines 192f.

⁶³Ibid., XXV, lines 349-350 (transliterated).

⁶⁴Dr. Matthews, editor, The Chester Plays (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1916), play XIV, lines 121-124. Hereafter designated as Chester M.

If you ask mercy I say never nay.⁶⁵

There is little evidence to suggest that the idea of earning the favor of God by means of God-pleasing actions was widely taught in these plays. The possible references are of such an ambiguous or uncertain nature that they hardly could be cited as conclusive evidence. One such reference is found in the Shepherds' Play of the Chester Cycle in which one of the shepherds offers a gift to the Christ Child by saying:

Loe! I bring thee a ball;
I pray thee, save me from hell,
So that I may wi th thee dwell
And fare well for aye.⁶⁶

Obviously this is rather weak evidence to support a theory that salvation by works is taught here. Nevertheless, it is cited as an example of a rather curious combination of offering and request.

A more explicit citation of doing things to cover sins can be taken from the Coventry Cycle in which John the Baptist says to the audience:

Baptym I counsell yow for to take
And do penance for your synnys sake
And for your offens amendys ye make
Your synnys for to hyde.⁶⁷

One final reference in this respect is found in the Chester Cycle where the shepherds, after viewing the Christ Child, vow to devote their lives to God and His service. One of the shepherds declares he will abandon all for the ascetic life.

⁶⁵Coventry, XXIV, lines 9-16 (translated).

⁶⁶Chester D, VII, lines 571-574.

⁶⁷Coventry, XXII, lines 23-26.

And I am hermyt
 To praise God to paye
 To walk by styre and by street,
 In wyldernes to walke for aye;
 And I shall no man meete,
 But for my lyving I will him pray,
 Bare-foted on my fete;
 And thus will I live Ever and aye.⁶⁸

The last line of this statement is ambiguous. The words "and thus" could be equivalent to "because of this expression of self-denial I shall live forever"; or it may simply mean that it is in this humble fashion that the shepherd intends to live out his life.

Sacraments

It is significant to note that in both the York and the Towneley Cycles the institution of the Lord's Supper is omitted from the play that deals with the meeting of the disciples and Jesus for the Passover in the Upper Room. The Towneley Cycle deals with this subject in its play on the Resurrection in which Jesus promises to feed those who cease from sin and ask mercy with the bread which is His own body. This bread becomes His body by the saying of five words.

That ilk veray brede of lyfe
 Becommys my fleshe in wordys fyfe;
 Who so it resauens in syn or stryfe
 Beze dede for euer;
 And whoso it takys in rightwys lyfe
 Dy shall he neuer.⁶⁹

The power of the words of institution is also indicated in the Coventry play on the Lord's Supper in which Jesus says,

⁶⁸Chester D, VII, lines 635-642.

⁶⁹Towneley, XXVI, lines 328-333. Editor of text notes this section as being crossed out with red ink in the MS. He suggests this was done after the Reformation.

Brethren, be[by?] the virtue of these words
that reheryd be
This that sheweth as bread to your apparens
Is made the very flesh and blood of me
To the which they that whole be saved must give
credens.70

The above expression also seems to allow for the late medieval teaching of transubstantiation inasmuch as there is a distinction made between the appearance and the actual essence of the bread.

Another interesting passage regarding the Lord's Supper is found in the Chester play on the Presentation in which Jesus speaks of Himself as the very bread of life. The significant statement is this that Jesus is portrayed as saying words to the effect that the transformation of the bread of the Sacrament into His body is dependent upon the faith of the receiver. Jesus says,

And that bread that I you geue,
Your wicked lyfe to amend,
Becomes my flesh through your beleife
And doth release your sinfull Band.⁷¹

At the baptism of Jesus John mentions baptism as a worthy sacrament and then says,

Ther ar sex othere and no mo,
The which thi self to erthe has sent.⁷²

Regarding the Sacrament of Baptism itself it is taught that it has as its purpose to wash and to cleanse man from sin.⁷³ It is a new rite

⁷⁰Coventry, XXVII, lines 702-705 (transliterated).

⁷¹Chester M, XVIII, lines 174-177.

72 Towneley, XIX, lines 197-198. According to the editor the MS. has "vj" in place of "sex;" but the "v" has been erased. This whole section dealing with the seven Sacraments has been struck through, evidently after the Reformation, and in the margin is added "corectyd and not playd."

73 York, XXI, line 78.

which at the coming of Jesus replaced the Old Testament circumcision.⁷⁴
 At His own baptism Jesus brings along oil and "cream" for John to use
 in the Sacrament.⁷⁵ Previously in the same play an angel restrains
 John from going to Jesus and tells him to wait for Jesus to come to
 him for baptism. John sees in these words of the angel a principle
 which he passes on for the benefit, and instruction, of the audience.

By this [statement of the angel] I may well understand
 That children shuld be brought to kyrk,
 For to be baptized in every land.⁷⁶

But the angel goes on to tell John that Jesus is to be baptized in the
 river and not in any church.⁷⁷

In the York play on Jesus' baptism Jesus gives the reasons for
 His own baptism. It is to serve as an example. But more than this, it
 is to be the act whereby the Sacrament of Baptism receives its power
 and virtue. Jesus says to John,

My wille is this, that fro this day
 The virtue of my baptym dwelle
 In baptyme-watir euere and aye
 Mankynde to taste,
 Thruh my grace thereto to take alway
 the haly gaste.⁷⁸

Hell and limbo

The plays teach that death shall come to all men, even to the

⁷⁴Chester D, IV, lines 199-200.

⁷⁵Towneley, XIX, line 115.

⁷⁶Ibid., lines 85-87 (transliterated).

⁷⁷Ibid., lines 89f.

⁷⁸York, XXI, lines 100-105.

mightiest. In some cases the dead will be forgotten by the friends and their families so that no masses will be sung for them.⁷⁹ According to Belsabub the Old Testament saints, after death, are shut up in a special place called "lymbus," from which they shall not escape.⁸⁰ Hell and limbo are not always carefully differentiated. In the Transfiguration play of the York Cycle Moses is summoned from hell. He reports that this has been his abode for years. He rejoices in Christ who will lead out Adam's kin from this dungeon. He says,

Two thousand years after Adam
Then gave God unto me his law.
And since then in hell has been our home,
Alas! Adam's kin; this shall you know,
Unto Christ comes, this is he
Who shall draw us from the dungeon.
He shall bring them to bliss
That now in sorrow are bound.⁸¹

Just before He descended into hell Christ sent a light to that region as a token of His coming. The saints in hell saw this light and particularly Isaiah and Simeon recall the words of their own prophecies which spoke of a light that would shine toward those in darkness. And now, they exclaim, they are witnessing the fulfillment of their prophecies.⁸² David, as the spokesman for the rest, cries out to Christ,

Come Lord! Come to hell anone,
And take out thy folk, everychen,
For those years are fully gone

⁷⁹Towneley, XXXI, lines 155f.

⁸⁰York, XXXVII, lines 110-198.

⁸¹Ibid., XXIII, lines 123-130 (translated).

⁸²Towneley, XXV, lines 21ff.

Sith mankynd first came heare.⁸³

Jesus comes and frees Adam, who has been there for 4600 years,⁸⁴ Eve, John the Baptist, Abraham, and the other saints from their bonds. Adam, accompanied by Michael, is sent to eternal bliss where he is surprised to see Enoch, Elijah, and the thief on the cross awaiting him.⁸⁵

However, not all are released from hell. Jesus declares that Cain and suicides, such as Judas, shall remain there along with tyrants and unbelievers.⁸⁶ At the same time Jesus binds the false devils, who, for their envious cruelty, shall never come out of hell.⁸⁷

Judgment

In the York Cycle the play on the Judgment begins with God recounting the events in the history of the world: the creation of the world, the fall of man into sin, the sending of God's Son into the world. Now that God has shown His love and mercy for the many years since the sending of His Son, His patience toward the wicked is at an end and He bids His angels to blow the trumpets announcing the Judgment.⁸⁸ All mankind is obliged to face this Judgment--popes, princes, priests,

⁸³Chester M., XVII, lines 85-88.

⁸⁴York, XXXVII, line 39; Towneley, XXV, line 372.

⁸⁵Chester M., XVII, lines 197-239.

⁸⁶York, XXXVII, lines 305-318.

⁸⁷Coventry, XXXV, lines 1399f.

⁸⁸York, XLVIII, lines 1-65.

rich, poor--and all of their works will be brought to light.⁸⁹ As they await the coming of Jesus to judge the good souls pray for mercy because of their sins. At the same time the wicked are terror stricken at the prospect of their wicked deeds being revealed. They know that they will be sent to hell to dwell with the black fiends.⁹⁰ Jesus comes down to earth in the flesh to pronounce judgment.⁹¹ But before He passes judgment He reminds the assembly once more of His suffering and death for mankind. And from this He leads directly into the judgment itself. For Jesus says,

All this I suffer for thy sake,
Say man, what suffer thou for me?⁹²

The judgment is therefore declared to be on the basis of the principle stated in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Those who showed love to the Lord by feeding those who were hungry, by clothing those who were naked, by visiting those in prison, by giving shelter and comfort to the needy shall find eternal rest in Heaven. Those who fail to do these things are doomed to hell.⁹³ There they shall be mocked by the demons and face an eternity of living in pitch and tar.⁹⁴

⁸⁹Coventry, XLII, lines 14-22.

⁹⁰York, XLVIII, lines 103-143.

⁹¹Towneley, XXX, line 86.

⁹²York, XLVIII, lines 275-276; cf. also Towneley, XXX, lines 432-433.

⁹³Towneley, XXX, lines 442-531; York, XLVIII, lines 285-372; Coventry, XLII, lines 72f.

⁹⁴Towneley, XXX, line 597.

The Towneley Cycle adds a bit of comic relief to this otherwise somber drama. Periodically throughout the play a pair of demons make their appearance, who engage in rather lively banter. They too hear the sound of the trumpet and make plans to attend the Judgment to serve as witnesses against the lost souls.⁹⁵ They make note of how empty hell appears since all the souls have left to attend the Judgment.⁹⁶ As they are gathering together their books and records which are to be used as evidence against the lost they express their relief that dooms day finally arrived. If it had been delayed much longer there would have been need for a larger hell.⁹⁷

Primacy of Peter

There is a readiness in these plays to elevate Peter above the rest of the Apostles. In the York play on the Last Supper Jesus speaks to all of His disciples. But it particularly is Peter that He singles out for special mention and for a special assignment regarding the rest of the Apostles. Jesus says,

The fende[fiend] is wrothe with you and me,
And will you marre if that he may.
But Petir I have prayed for thee,
So that thou shall not drede his dray[attempts];
And comfort thou this meyne[company]
And wisse[teach] hem [them] when I am gone away.⁹⁸

Jesus, in the Chester series, explained to Peter the reason for his

⁹⁵Ibid., line 113.

⁹⁶Ibid., line 116.

⁹⁷Ibid., lines 179f.

⁹⁸York, XXVII, lines 118-123; cf. Luke 22:32 which supports this assignment.

fall into the sin of denial. This was permitted by God so that Peter himself would be more inclined to grant grace to his subjects who would call upon him. Jesus says,

Therefore I suffered thee to fall,
That to thy subjects, hereafter all
That to thee shuld cry and call,
Thou may have minning[remembrance]
Sithen thy self so fallen hase,
The more inclyne to graunt Grace!
Goe forth--forgeuen is thy trespass--
And haue here my Blessinge!⁹⁹

Even the Apostle Paul is presented as acknowledging the superiority of Peter. At the gathering of the Apostles before the Assumption of Mary Paul says to Peter,

The keyes of hevене peter - god hath given you betake
And also ye ben peler of lith[pillar of stone]and
prynce of vs all.¹⁰⁰

Mary

The respect accorded to the Virgin Mary is quite pronounced in these plays. Mary is presented as possessing the qualities of spirituality, simplicity, and innocence. Already at the age of three Mary, when brought to the Temple, is able to recite the fifteen psalms asked of her by the episcopus--much to his surprise.¹⁰¹ In the York play which deals with the flight into Egypt there occurs an example of her simplicity. After Joseph has been told that they must flee to Egypt, Mary busies herself with the packing until her curiosity gets

⁹⁹Chester M., XVIII, lines 520-527.

¹⁰⁰Coventry, XLI, lines 216-217.

¹⁰¹Ibid., IX, line 84.

the best of her and in all candor she asks Joseph, "Where is Egypt?"¹⁰²

The personal purity of Mary is stressed in a number of passages. Mary Magdalene greets Mary with the words,

O in-maculate modyr of all women most meke.¹⁰³

In the play on the Purification Mary suggests to Joseph that they go to the Temple to fulfill the Law of Moses regarding the birth of a male child. Joseph agrees to go, but says,

Yea, Marye, though it be no nede,
Seith thou arte cleane in thoughte and deed.¹⁰⁴

In the Temptation of Jesus Satan, speaking of Jesus' mother says,

His mother I wot did never amisse.¹⁰⁵

And again,

Sith the world first began
Knew I never such a man [i.e. Jesus],
Borne of a deadlish [mortal] woman,
And yet she is wemless [stainless, pure].¹⁰⁶

Mary is given the title of "Queen of Heaven" in the York plays, particularly in the account of her Assumption,¹⁰⁷ while in a Towneley play she is given the rather curious designation of "The Empress of Hell."¹⁰⁸ Further praise is offered to Mary by an angel who makes an acrostic based on the name "Maria".

¹⁰²York, XVIII, line 177.

¹⁰³Coventry XXVIII, line 1041.

¹⁰⁴Chester D, XI, lines 129-130.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., XII, line 13.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., lines 25-28.

¹⁰⁷York, XLVII, line 7.

¹⁰⁸Towneley, XIX, line 264.

M--Mayde most mercyful and mekeste in mende

A--Auerte [Averter?] of the Anguysch that Adam began

R--Regina of regyon Reyneng with-owtyn ende

I--Innocent be Influens of Jesses kende

A--Aduocat most Autentyk your Antecer Anna¹⁰⁹

A prediction is made by Jesus regarding the future honor of Mary as He says to her after the Resurrection,

All this world that was forlorn
Shall worship you both eve and morn
For had I not of you be[en] born
Man had be[en] lost in hell.¹¹⁰

Mary is considered to be the source for help in the time of various troubles. Even Isaac, after he sees that his father's intention to slay him is according to God's will, cries out to Mary.¹¹¹ Mary herself prays to Jesus that He would grant mercy to all who call upon her in storms, those in need, and especially women in child birth.¹¹² At the hour of Mary's death the Jews ask her to help them into heaven:

Since thow Lady come of our kind,
Thou help us now, thou very virgin
That we may be brought unto bliss.¹¹³

Two of the cycles, York and Coventry, present plays dealing with the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary. The Coventry play acknowledges

¹⁰⁹Coventry, IX, lines 245-249 (transliterated).

¹¹⁰Ibid., XXXV, lines 1448-1451.

¹¹¹Chester D, IV, lines 315f.

¹¹²York, XLV, lines 137ff.

¹¹³Ibid., lines 124-126 (transliterated).

that the story is drawn from a book called "apocriphum."¹¹⁴

Miscellaneous teachings

Among the several references to the papacy in these plays, the one which appears in the Towneley play on Herod the Great seems the most significant. Herod indicates that the papal office can be filled on the basis of political maneuvering. In the play Herod is so pleased with a counselor's suggestion that all the children of Bethlehem be killed that he tells the counselor that if he (Herod) should continue to live he will guarantee to make him pope.¹¹⁵

Popular religious customs of the day are also reflected by certain of the oaths stated in the plays. In the First Shepherd play one of the shepherds says a "night spell" before going to sleep:

ffor ferde we be fryght/ a crosse lett vs kest cast,
 Cryst crosse, benedyght/ eest and west, ffor drede.
 Ihesus onazorus [of Nazareth?],
 Crucyefixus,
 Morcus, andreus [Mark, Andrew? corruption of Mortuus
 etc. in the Creed?],

God be oure spede!¹¹⁶

A favorite oath for the villain in the plays, such as Pharaoh, Herod, and the soldiers, is to call upon Mauhounds,¹¹⁷ that is, Mohammed.

A very significant explanation is given in the Chester Cycle on the meaning of the words of the Creed, Sanctam eclesiam catholicam,

¹¹⁴Coventry, XLI, line 4.

¹¹⁵Towneley, XVI, line 263.

¹¹⁶Ibid., XII, lines 289-295.

¹¹⁷York, XIX, line 18; Coventry, XX, line 369.

sanctorum communionem. Saint Matthew is presented as interpreting these words to mean:

And I beleue, through gods grace,
Such leefe[belief] as Holy Church hase,
That god his body graunted vs was,
To vse in form of Bread.¹¹⁸

The last two lines apparently are an interpretation based on the view that sanctorum is neuter rather than masculine.

¹¹⁸Chester M, XXI, lines 343-346.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Religious drama in fifteenth century England, though originating with the clergy and the monks, had become the property of the lay people. This is especially true of the great mystery cycles performed by the various trade guilds. Although the authorship and, to a degree, the supervision of these plays remained with the clergy, it was nevertheless the laity who planned, performed, and attended these dramas. And since drama can be considered as the corporate expression of those who plan it, and those who see and hear it, these religious cycles can be considered as the religious expression of the lay people of fifteenth century England.

It might be anticipated that this expression would be quite in accordance with the official teachings of the church at that time. To a degree this is true. Characteristic doctrines of the medieval Western Church are expressed in these plays. There is reference made to the seven sacraments. Medieval developments in Eucharistic doctrine find expression. Within this study there is at least one reference to masses for the dead. Mary is presented as an individual who intercedes with her Son for her clients. The primacy of Peter above the other Apostles is also noted. Such teachings stand out quite clearly in these plays.

At the same time these plays contain much that is neither biblical nor in accordance with the official teachings of the medieval Church. Spurious legends of various types are interwoven into the fabric of

the biblical account. Liberties are taken in the delineation of such characters as Cain, Isaac, Pilate, and especially Noah's wife. The sequence of events as recorded in the biblical account is often drastically rearranged. But in the playwright's mind there is a purpose behind all of this. He cannot be faulted for failing to reproduce the biblical story exactly as it appears in the Bible; this was not his purpose. Instead, being a dramatist, he employed whatever was at hand, whether it was events from daily life, legends from folk lore, or inventions from his own imagination, in order that his play might "live" for his audience.

But despite these distinctly medieval teachings and despite these definitely apocryphal elements the content of these plays, for the most part, is biblical in nature. Regarding the theological content of the cycles, they reveal that men of that day could understand the working out of God's action to save mankind from its sins. The fact that the plays take the form of cycles, from creation to judgment, is an indication of this understanding. The people could see that God is not just a wrathful God (Cain and Abel); but He is also a God who shows mercy (Noah and the Flood). They attach vital importance to the person and the work of Jesus Christ. But above all else it was His suffering, death and resurrection that held their attention. The large number of plays on these subjects attest to this interest. Jesus the innocent suffered and died so that they the guilty might live. This forgiveness is received by faith, though sometimes there is mixed with this some thought of doing penance in order to receive it. The final judgment will be based on how well they have

shown their love toward Jesus by showing their love toward their fellow men.

This is the testimony of his faith which the fifteenth century Englishman expresses through his religious drama.

APPENDIX A

Regulations for the Celebration of Cycles in York¹

We command of ye King's behalf and ye Mayor and ye Sheriffs of this City, that no man go armed in this city with swords nor Carlisle axes, nor none other defences in disturbance of ye King's peace and ye play, or hindering of ye procession of Corpus Christi, and that they leave their harness in their Inns, saving knights and squires of worship that have swords born after them, of pain of forfeiture of their weapons and imprisonment of their bodies. And that men that bring forth pageants that they play at their places that is assigned therefor and nowhere else, of ye pain of forfeiture to be raised that is ordained therefore, that is to say 40/.² And that men of crafts and all other men that find torches that they come forth in array and in ye manner as it has been used and customed before this time, not having weapon, carrying tapers of ye pageants. And officers that are keepers of the peace of pain of forfeiture of their franchise and their bodies to prison. And all manner of craftsmen that bringeth forth their pageants in order and course by good players well arrayed and openly speaking upon payne losing 100/² to be paid to the chamber without any pardon. And that every player that shall play be ready in his pageant at the convenient time, that is to say at the midhour between 4 and 5 of the clock in the morning, and then all other pageants fast following ilk one after other as their course is without tarrying.

¹Sidney W. Clarke, The Miracle Play in England (London: Wm. Andrews Co., 1897), pp. 24f.

²Most probably these sums represent pence rather than shillings.

APPENDIX B

Description of Pageants by Archdeacon Rogers (d. 1595)¹

[At Chester] Every company had his pagiants, or parte, which pagiants weare a high scafolde with two rowmes, a higher and a lower, upon four wheels. In the lower they apparelled themselves, and in the higher rowme they played, beinge all open on the tope, that all behoulders mighte heare and see them. The places where they played them was in every streete. They begane first at the abay gates, and when the firste pagiante was played it was wheeled to the highe crosse before the mayor, and so to every streete; and soe every streete had a pagiant playinge before them at one time, till all the pagiants for the daye appoynted weare played; and when one pagiant was neere ended, worde was broughte from streete to streete, that soe they mighte come in place thereof excedinge orderlye, and all the streets have theire pagiantes afore them all at one time playinge togeather; to se which playes was greate resorte, and also scafoldes and stages made in the streetes in those places where they determined to play theire pagiantes.

¹Quoted by Alfred W. Pollard, English Miracle Plays, Moralities, and Interludes (7th Edition; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1923), pp. xxvf.

12. Annunciation

13. Joseph's Trouble with Mary

14. Journey to Bethlehem; The Birth of Jesus

15. The Angels and the Shepherds

16. Coming of the Three Kings to Jesus

17. The Adoration

18. Flight into Egypt

19. Massacre of the Innocents

20. Christ with the Doctors in the Temple

¹Mary Bekechin Smith, editor, The York Plays (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1905).

APPENDIX C

List of Plays in York Cycle¹

1. The Creation; The Fall of Lucifer
2. The Creation to the fifth day
3. God creates Adam and Eve
4. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden
5. Man's disobedience and Fall
6. Adam and Eve driven from Eden
7. Sacrifices of Cain and Abel
8. Building of the Ark
9. Noah and the Flood
10. Abraham's Sacrifice
11. The Israelites in Egypt; The Passage of the Red Sea
12. Annunciation
13. Joseph's Trouble with Mary
14. Journey to Bethlehem; The Birth of Jesus
15. The Angels and the Shepherds
16. Coming of the Three Kings to Herod
17. The Adoration
18. Flight into Egypt
19. Massacre of the Innocents
20. Christ with the Doctors in the Temple

¹Lucy Toulmin Smith, editor, The York Plays (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1885).

21. Baptism of Jesus
22. Temptation of Jesus
23. The Transfiguration
24. Woman taken in Adultery; The Raising of Lazarus
25. Entry into Jerusalem
26. Conspiracy to take Jesus
27. The Last Supper
28. The Agony and Betrayal
29. Peter denies Jesus; Jesus examined by Caiaphas
30. Dream of Pilate's wife; Jesus before Pilate
31. Trial before Herod
32. Second accusation before Pilate; Remorse of Judas
33. Judgment on Jesus
34. Christ led up to Calvary
35. Crucifixion of Christ
36. Death and Burial of Christ
37. Harrowing of Hell
38. Resurrection
39. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene
40. Travelers to Emmaus
41. Purification of Mary
42. Incredulity of Thomas
43. The Ascension
44. Descent of the Holy Spirit
45. The Death of Mary
46. Appearance of our Lady to Thomas

APPENDIX D

List of Plays in the Coventry Cycle¹

1. Creation
2. Fall of man
3. Cain and Abel
4. Noah
5. Abraham and Isaac
6. Moses
7. The Prophets
8. The Conception of Mary
9. Mary in the Temple
10. The Betrothal of Mary
11. The Salutation and Conception
12. Joseph's Return
13. The Visit to Elizabeth
14. The Trial of Joseph and Mary
15. The Birth of Jesus
16. The Adoration of the Shepherds
18. The Adoration of the Magi
19. The Purification
20. The Massacre of the Innocents
21. Christ and the Doctors
- (22.) The Baptism of Christ

¹K. S. Block, editor, Ludus Coventriae or the Plaie Called Corpus Christi (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1920).

23. The Temptation
24. The Woman taken in Adultery
25. The Raising of Lazarus
26. The Entry into Jerusalem; The Council of the Jews
27. The Last Supper
28. Betrayal of Christ
29. King Herod
30. Trial of Jesus
31. Pilate's Wife's Dream
32. Condemnation and Crucifixion of Christ
33. The Descent into Hell
34. Burial of Christ
35. Resurrection
36. The Announcement to the Three Maries
37. The Appearance to Mary Magdalen
38. The Appearance to Cleophas and Luke; Appearance to Thomas
39. The Ascension
40. The Day of Pentecost
41. Assumption of the Virgin
42. Domesday
43. Festival of the Ascension
44. Ascension of the Virgin
45. Conception (of the Virgin)
46. Galilee

APPENDIX E

List of Plays in Towneley Cycle¹

1. Creatio
2. Mactacio Abel
3. Processus Noe cum filiis
4. Abraham
5. Isaac
6. Jacob
7. Processus Prophetarum
8. Pharoa
9. Cesar Augustus
10. Annunciacio
11. Salutacio Elezabeth
12. Una Pagina Pastorum (Prima)
13. Alia Eorundem (Secunda)
14. Oblacio Magorum
15. Fugacio Josep & Marie in Egyptum
16. Magnus Herodes
17. Purificacio Marie
18. Pagina Doctorum
19. Johannes Baptista
20. Conspiracio (et Capcio)
21. Coliphizacio

¹George England and Alfred W. Pollard, editors, The Towneley Plays (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1897).

22. **Fagellacio**
23. **Processus Crucis (et Crucifixio)**
24. **Processus Talentorum**
25. **Extraccio Animarum (ab inferno)**
26. **Resurreccio Domini**
27. **Peregrini**
28. **Thomas Indie**
29. **Ascencio Domini**
30. **Judicium**
31. **Lazarus**
32. **Suspencio Jude (Judas)**

33. *Offerings of the Three Kings*
34. *The Slaying of the Innocents*
35. *The Purification*
36. *The Temptation; The Women taken in Adultery*
37. *Lazarus*
38. *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem*
39. *Christ's Betrayal*
40. *The Passion; The Crucifixion*
41. *The Carrying of the Cross*
42. *The Descent from the Cross*
43. *The Pilgrims of Canterbury*

¹Baron Hadow, editor, *The Chester Plays* (London: Fagan Paul, Tranch, Trancher & Co., 1891); W. B. E. Rieu, editor, *The Chester Plays* (London: Fagan Paul, Tranch, Trancher & Co., 1918).

APPENDIX F

List of Plays in Chester Cycle¹

1. The Fall of Lucifer
2. The Creation and Fall
3. Noah's Flood
4. Lot and Abraham
5. Balaam and his Ass
6. The Salutation and the Nativity
7. The Play of the Shepherds
8. The Three Kings
9. Offerings of the Three Kings
10. The Slaughter of the Innocents
11. The Purification
12. The Temptation; The Woman taken in Adultery
13. Lazarus
14. Christ's Entry into Jerusalem
15. Christ's Betrayal
16. The Passion; The Crucifixion
17. The Harrowing of Hell
18. The Resurrection
19. The Pilgrims of Emmaus

¹Herman Deimling, editor, The Chester Plays (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1893); Dr. [G.W.] Matthews, editor, The Chester Plays (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1916).

20. The Ascension
21. The Emission of the Holy Spirit
22. The Prophets and Antichrist
23. Antichrist
24. The Last Judgment

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