

THE YORK PLAYS AND  
THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI:  
A Reconsideration.

*Pamela M. King*

One of the side-effects of the Records of Early English Drama project has been to foster a gradual acceptance that the forms and contexts of biblical drama were more varied and plural than has been accepted heretofore. Accordingly the previously accepted canonical similarity of the play cycles which have survived, fostered by anthologies of mystery plays, is ripe for review. This frees the York Cycle from obligatory comparison with, for example, Chester, to be studied as a unique dramatic phenomenon, our only surviving text of a full cycle of fifteenth-century Corpus Christi plays, designed for performance in celebration of that feast.

My own larger project on the York Cycle involves re-examining the designation 'biblical drama', particularly in relation to the plays' intended audience.<sup>1</sup> This involves a return to exploring the cycle's relationship with the liturgy and with lay patterns and experiences of worship in general. The rejection by scholars in the 1960s of the assumptions of Chambers and others that Mystery Cycles represented a secularisation of Latin liturgical drama, coupled with a shift in critical attention from the texts of the plays to their contexts, has meant that there are no recent sustained studies of the relationship between the plays and the liturgy. Yet, for urban laypeople, the liturgy provided the skeleton of all their communal religious experience, the pattern of their calendar, and their focus on the different biblical texts which go to make up the Christian narrative, so a return to the text must necessarily involve a renewed focus on the forms of lay worship.

This paper goes back to look at the relationship between the York Plays and the feast of Corpus Christi with which their performance was linked, a relationship which has been the subject of a number of studies and a wide range of different approaches.<sup>2</sup> It brings two related and specific kinds of evidence to bear on the debate. Firstly it reviews the relationship between the plays, the late-formed religious confraternity of Corpus Christi, and contemporary lay devotional tastes, before moving on to consider some paraliturgical resonances within the text of the cycle as it survives which

relate to patterns of worship of the Host by the laity. Taken together, these two different types of evidence help to articulate a reading of the Cycle as a celebration specific to the feast of Corpus Christi, rather than a reprise of all Christian history located at the time of the feast because the weather was likely to be good and the day long.

It is well known that the York Cycle predates the formation of the city's Corpus Christi Guild.<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Johnston asserts that 'the Guild of Corpus Christi never at any time had anything to do with the Corpus Christi Play'. The Corpus Christi procession moved according to its own timetable and route around the city, tying up those involved, presumably, for the duration of its progress. The pageants assembled early in the morning on Toft Green and their sequential progress from station to station took up all the hours of daylight, involving not only the players and stage-hands, but the trade- and craft-guild members who accompanied each waggon. It would not have been possible, therefore, to march in the Corpus Christi procession accompanying the Host, and to be involved with the production and accompanying of the pageants, until the procession was moved to the day after Corpus Christi from 1476.<sup>4</sup> However, if the Guild of Corpus Christi as a whole had no hand in the plays, the same cannot be said of its individual members. Its membership lists include the Guild Master and all but one of the pageant masters mentioned in the Mercers' 1433 indenture by which the guild transferred the responsibility for its stage properties. They also record the names of twelve mayors in the first twenty years of the confraternity's existence.<sup>5</sup>

The voguishness of Corpus Christi amongst the York mercantile élite in the first half of the fifteenth century is well attested not only from the membership lists of the confraternity but from testamentary patterns. The popularity of devotion to Corpus Christi cuts across social divisions in the city, from the aldermanic group to the more modest members of individual craft and trade guilds. It perhaps needs to be explained here that recent research has shown that whereas individual craft and trade guilds had primary responsibility for individual plays, there was also an 'aldermanic group' in York, at least in the early fifteenth century, who were not members of trade or craft guilds at all. These were the seriously wealthy merchants engaged in the wholesale and luxury goods trade, particularly with the Low Countries, some of them resident aliens, all of them having moved direct from the purchase of the freedom of the city straight into the urban governing élite.<sup>6</sup> It is not until the leaner economic years of the later fifteenth century, and the more sophisticated evolution of the trade and

craft guild, that we see this social group volunteering for integration into the local protectionist structures, particularly the Mercers Guild. It is possible that the eventual separation of the plays, which remained on Corpus Christi Day, from the Corpus Christi procession, coincides with the gradual assimilation of the aldermanic group, who customarily took part in the procession, with those groups who were customarily responsible for the plays. What is clear, however, is that amongst both groups there is consistent testamentary evidence of a focusing on eucharistic worship in line with the revival of sacramental orthodoxy which characterised lay patterns of worship from the early fifteenth century.

First, the membership of the confraternity of Corpus Christi itself, a Friendly Society which embraced the whole lay social spectrum, men and women as well as a number of local secular clergy, includes all those mentioned in the Mercers' 1433 indenture, except William Yarm. Richard Louth is registered with Joan his mother in 1414/15, and his son joined in 1422/23, the same year that Thomas Curtays and William Bedale and his wife are also registered. Nicholas Usflete joined in 1431/32. Both he and Bedale were later to become mayors of York. William Holbeck is registered in 1429/30 with Agnes his wife, and a William Holbeck *nuper major Eboracensis* was one of the first keepers of the guild.<sup>7</sup> And Henry Market, one of York's resident alien merchants, is registered with Matilda his wife in 1428/29.<sup>8</sup> Market was one of the executors of Usflete's will.<sup>9</sup>

The wills of the other York mayors of the early fifteenth century include many bequests to the guild.<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Blackburn Senior, mayor in 1413, possibly York's wealthiest medieval merchant, left four huge torches for carrying on the Corpus Christi procession for as many years as they might last.<sup>11</sup> Richard Russell, a merchant and vintner, mayor in 1421 and 1430 and another extremely wealthy man, left the guild 40s among a plethora of charitable bequests (6: 7).<sup>12</sup> John Alstanemore, mayor in 1427, left 20s to the Corpus Christi guild (5: 4),<sup>13</sup> and his brother, Thomas, also a merchant of York and Calais, left 32s 4d 'to the shrine of Corpus Christi made in York for the procession of that festival'. John Bolton II, mayor in 1432 and the merchant whose family is associated with York's most famous Book of Hours, left 20s to the Guild of Corpus Christi (6: 11),<sup>14</sup> and William Ormshede, his successor to the mayoral office, in turn left 13s 4d for the shrine, 'to be made by that brotherhood in York' (6: 13).<sup>15</sup> Thomas Kirkham, mayor in 1435, again left 63s 8d to the guild in his will of the same year (7: 7).<sup>16</sup> All were, of course, members of the confraternity.

PAMELA M. KING

Beyond specific bequests to the Corpus Christi Guild, however, the testamentary tastes of the early-fifteenth-century urban elite in York show broader patterns of devotion to the Eucharist. Pervasively this takes the form of bequests of wax torches to illuminate various altars, generally in their parish churches. The lighting of the altar was of particular importance for the moment in the Mass when the priest consecrated the Host, and lights also had a general significance for the laity, whose chief relationship with the Eucharist was a visual one, as we shall see later. Nicholas Blackburn left torches to illuminate the altar at the moment of the elevation of the Host all over York and had taken the prudent step of entering into an agreement with a named wax chandler to ensure his wishes were carried out.<sup>17</sup> Only slightly less ostentatious was Russell, whose equally pious will includes 40lb of wax for *cierges* to burn around his body and 48s worth of torches, and wills 'that eight of those not consumed shall be given to the high altar, two to the altar of the Blessed Mary, and two to the altar of St Katherine in my parish church aforesaid (St John the Baptist, Hungate), to burn there at the time of the elevation of Christ's body' (6: 3).<sup>18</sup> Thomas Esyngwold, mayor in 1423, made provision in his will for a total of 80lbs of wax for candles of which 'two shall remain at the high altar of the same church, and the other four shall remain for the other four altars standing in the same church, to burn at the time of the elevation of Christ's body' (4: 3).<sup>19</sup> Thomas Bracebridge, mayor in 1426 (4: 7),<sup>20</sup> provided for 10 torches each of 14lbs of pure wax,

of which 10 torches I will that 2 shall remain to burn for reverence at the time of elevation of the most sacred body of our Lord Jesus Christ at the high altar in the parish church aforesaid the third at the altar of blessed Mary, Mother of God, the fourth at the altar of St John the Evangelist in the same church, the fifth at the altar of St Anne in the said church, the sixth at the altar of St Nicholas in the same church, the seventh at the altar of St James in the same church, and the three others I will be placed singly in a mortise of stone made for that purpose, to burn daily from the elevation of the sacrament until the priest communicates.

This entry in particular makes clear the demarcation between the laity's part in the office — as seeing and illuminating to better see — and the priest's, which entailed the actual physical communion. Most other wills from this tightly-knit social group contain a comparable element.

These devotional tastes, and indeed the formation of the York Guild of Corpus Christi itself, have their place in the ecclesiastical politics of the early fifteenth century. The period following *De heretico comburendo* (1406) afforded not only constraints but opportunities in the affirmation of orthodoxy, as is most arrestingly demonstrated by Nicholas Love's *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*, presented to Arundel in 1410 and the most prominent contemporary text of Northern provenance. Fifty-six complete manuscripts of Love's book survive, comparable with Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* and with Henry Suso's *Horologium Sapientiae*.<sup>21</sup> *The Mirroure* is a reworking in English of the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditaciones Vitae Christi* which emphatically affirms the orthodox doctrine with one significant area of addition on the sacrament of the Eucharist.<sup>22</sup> Love, although not of Northern birth, may have been the Augustinian prior of York in 1400 who then transferred to the stricter order to become prior at Mount Grace in 1410. Love addresses his version of *The Mirroure*, the original of which was written in Latin for a female religious audience, to 'lewd men and wommen and hem that ben of symple understanding'. Ian Doyle sees both the expectation of a wider audience and the dedication to Arundel as later additions recording a 'positive mandate for publication to edify the faithful and confute the Lollards', possibly 'replacing the Lollard gospels'.<sup>23</sup> The English translation of Suso, known as *The Seven Poyntes of Trewe Love and Everlastyng Wisdome*, also contains a long section on eucharistic devotion very close in many of its details to Love's additional chapter, as Elizabeth Salter (then Zeeman) demonstrated.<sup>24</sup>

There remains, however, a large step to be made from a devotional text from the North written by an intellectual incomer in regular orders and the devotional drama of York's indigenous laity in the years immediately following, even if both belong to a period in which the assertion of orthodoxy was important, bringing with it caution in matters of gospel narrative and preaching and a concomitant reinforcing of sacramentalism.<sup>25</sup> Michael Sargent is at pains to distance himself from the idea that Love provided any direct influence on the plays.<sup>26</sup> Certainly Jonathan Hughes' assertion that Love's chapter on the Eucharist was written expressly for the newly formed Corpus Christi Guild, and that authors like Love and Melton manipulated the Corpus Christi celebrations to their own devotional writing, should be treated with caution.<sup>27</sup> Urban social patterns, levels of literacy, and economic differences caused fissures not only between the vocational religious and the urban laity,<sup>28</sup> but within those groups: we must work harder to find concrete evidence from a source

accessible to all if we wish to demonstrate the infiltration of contemporary doctrinal politics into lay devotional tastes.

The *Mirror* and the English translation of Suso supply us with evidence of how the orthodox were expected to consider the Eucharist and what the celebration of the *Corpus Christi* entailed in the eyes of ecclesiastical orthodoxy. Guild records and wills suggest the popularity of eucharist worship amongst York's lay élite who managed the plays, and indeed the formation of the Corpus Christi Guild itself substantiates that. We also know that this accorded with the ecclesiastical climate which must have exerted more formal influences on the plays' clerical authors, granted that our only surviving texts were recorded some half-century later. The connection between the two lies in evidence drawn from the shared experience of changed patterns and emphases in worship. Echoes of liturgical and paraliturgical material in the texts of the plays indicate a devotional preoccupation with the Eucharist common to the Corpus Christi Guild, with its mixed clerical and lay membership, and the whole authorising milieu in which the plays were generated and performed.

We have already seen that the wills of the lay members of the Corpus Christi Guild, whether or not they leave money to the guild and the procession, tend to make provision for altar lights. This accords not only with the generalised focus on eucharistic worship, but a particular devotion to illuminating the consecrated Host so that it might be the better seen. The significance of the gesture was first discussed at the Synod of Paris 1198–1203, and the entry of the elevation into the Roman missal was then mediated to clergy and laity through the liturgical books of the new Orders: the Franciscan missal of 1243 and the Dominican missal of 1256.<sup>29</sup> It was considered out of the question that the laity should receive communion more than occasionally, so regular eucharistic worship for them focused on the need to look upon the consecrated Host. Popular manuals of the period attributed all manner of benefits to those who merely looked. It was claimed variously to ensure everything from freedom from oaths lightly sworn to a reduction of pain in childbirth and from toothache,<sup>30</sup> a day's guarantee of not going hungry, going blind, dying, or even aging,<sup>31</sup> of finding work easy, and having all sorrows cured.<sup>32</sup> Corpus Christi processions allowed the whole community to gaze beneficially at the Real Presence of Christ as He moved amongst them in the streets. So in terms of the Office of the Mass itself, the moment of the elevation of the Host, not the communion itself, was, for the laity, the liturgical climax.<sup>33</sup>

The moment of elevation was not only, though most crucially, brightly lit, but bells were pealed and incense burnt, while both the *Lay Folks' Mass Book* and Myrc's *Instructions for Parish Priests* make it clear that the elevation had become a true substitute for communion for the laity, that the Mass had become an essentially voyeuristic experience.<sup>34</sup> Contemporary illustrations for the Mass also tend to single out the elevation of the Host as the defining moment, as can be seen from modest English Seven Sacraments sequences, such as that displayed around the font in the parish church of Salle (Norfolk), to the famous Antwerp altarpiece by Van der Weyden. Fifteenth-century Books of Hours, written for the pious and affluent laity, often go one step further, illustrating the Host miracle known as 'the Mass of Pope Gregory', where Gregory is shown kneeling at Mass as the wounded Christ emerges from the altar as from the tomb. But this is not to suggest that the layperson's participation in the Mass was commonly only passive; Myrc particularly emphasises what is appropriate behaviour at the moment of elevation or 'sacring', the moment at which God descends. Kneeling, raising hands in veneration and greeting the Lord with a prayer, of which he suggests an example beginning, 'Iesu lord, welcom thow be' (line 265), are all part of recommended behaviour for the devout.

Several texts for these paraliturgical prayers have survived, many of them in the form of lyrical verses.<sup>35</sup> Eamon Duffy notes that 'the prayers invoked Christ not only by his death but by his resurrection, by the descent of the spirit, by his coming again in glory'.<sup>36</sup> Yet the striking factor about the surviving corpus of English elevation prayers is not so much their rather obvious content, but the degree of consensus in their rhetorical formulation. They all take the form of a greeting, almost always prefaced by 'Hail' or 'Welcome'. Christ was being greeted in person as His presence reaffirmed the active bond between heaven and earth, the forgiveness of sin guaranteed by his sacrifice which was about to be re-enacted by the celebrating clergy. The vernacular prayers derive from the non-ritual accretions to the *Sanctus* of the Mass which, in a number of manuscripts of Mass and Office, take the form of salutations.<sup>37</sup>

The York Cycle's special relationship with Corpus Christi can, I believe, be best approached through a consideration of how the elevation of the Host was mediated visually and verbally to the laity. The audience accustomed to going to look upon Christ in the form of the Host through the eyes of faith and devout imagination, either at the Mass or in the Corpus Christi procession, were treated to less theologically 'real' but more

PAMELA M. KING

directly visually available representations of Him in the plays. The sacred flesh was represented in the flesh, either as a new-born sacrificial infant, or as the Man of Sorrows, displaying the wounds of the Passion. If it seems dangerously idolatrous, the texts of the plays indicate no anxieties of that order, as the text too mimics the moment when the Host was elevated with fervent prayers of welcome. There are at least thirty-five separate formal greetings in the York Plays which superficially conform to the formulae employed by elevation prayers. Most are addressed to Christ. Others of course are versions of the greetings *Salve Regina* and *Ave Maria*, independent antiphons, similar in rhetorical structure and also echoed by the playwrights, but addressed not to Christ but to the Virgin.<sup>38</sup> Two are addressed to Pilate, and might be thought to derive from greetings for secular rulers in, for example, Royal Entries, and therefore properly have nothing to do with the prayers which invoke the presence of Christ, except that greetings in Royal Entries are generally declarative rather than exclamatory in mode. Henry VII was welcomed into York in 1487, for example, in the following terms:

Moste high and mighty . christen Prince and our moost drad  
souuerain lige lord . your true and faithfull . subgiettes . the Mayre  
Aldremen Shereffes and Common Counsaill With thool . body of  
this your Citie in ther moost humbly . Wise Welcomes your moost  
noble grace vnto the same ./ yeving Due lovinges . vnto almighty  
god for the grete fortune noble trihumpe and victory . Which it  
hath pleased his godhede to graunt vnto your highnesse in  
subduying your . Rebelles and ennymes at this tyme ...<sup>39</sup>

The greetings in the Cycle addressed to Pilate do not take this form, but echo precisely the formulæ employed for greeting Christ already established in the cycle and are, therefore, the more chilling in their effect. The exclamatory greetings which occur specifically at moments when Christ appears seem to create dramatic moments which are not merely recollective of New Testament history, but which, through para-liturgical mediation, are intentionally analogous to the process of transubstantiation. Their verbal specificity vicariously unifies pageants which are attributable to a number of different hands.

In the shorter elevation lyric, the focus is generally on the supplicant, asking for mercy and forgiveness for sins, but in the more elaborate examples Christ's mystical and paradoxical nature is also explored. An example of the sub-genre which adequately illustrates the rhetorical

THE YORK PLAYS AND THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI

patterns, range, and treatment of subject matter is this from BL MS Royal 17 C xvii from the early fifteenth century:<sup>40</sup>

Hayle Iesu! Godys Sone in forme of bred!  
Borne of Mary withowtyn syn;  
þou sawe me, Iesu, fro endeles dede,  
And þe to worcheppe lat me neuer blyn.

Hayle, Almyghty God in Trinyte! Blyssed be þou, Iesu, batte  
God and Man, in þi mageste Lorde of myght maste.

Hayl Hope! Hale Fayth! Hayle Charyte!  
Stedfastly Lorde I trowe in þe,  
A God and Persons Thre:  
Fader and Sone and Hely Gaste.

Hayle Lyfe! Hayl Merci! Hayl Hele! Hayle Pese and Pyte!  
Hayle warra Crystys Flesche and Blode  
þat flowed oute of þi precyus syde  
þat Longeus wyt hys spere opyned wyde,  
Iesu, qwene þou hange on þe Rode.

Iesu Cryste of me þou af mercy,  
And for þi precyus Passyon,  
Of my trespas þou af pete.  
In thocht, in worde, in dede,  
Als I em gylty,  
Iesu, forgyf my syn.

And scheld me, Iesu, euer fra þe Fende;  
Graunte me schr ... and howsull at my laste ende;  
A ... luf of Mary þi blyssed Moder ... frende,  
Gude Iesu ... Heuen and ay lastyng blys ...

Amen

This focus is initially on Christ, celebrating aspects of His present, past, future, and perpetual nature by drawing on stock fields of contemplative imagery, but it then shifts into supplicatory mode, drawing attention to the speaker/viewer and his/her plight as sinner in need of the active operation of grace. As we shall see, these ingredients are broadly repeated or manipulated by very similar verse-speeches at the significant moments in the cycle when Christ is recognised.

The first formal greeting in the York Plays is, of course, not addressed directly to Christ but is the *Ave Maria* in the Annunciation and Visitation (Spicers, Play 12). What Gabriel says is,

Hayle Marie, full of grace and blysse ... 12: 145

The origin of the greeting is in the Gospel account in Luke 1: 28, but had developed as a liturgical antiphon for the feast of the Annunciation. While the Englished version in the York play is, therefore, liturgically specific in its own right, within both the rhetorical organisation and the narrative logic of the cycle, its 'hail' formula is rendered formulaically proleptic, being followed by,

Oure lord God is with þe. 12: 146

This is the first influx of grace, the first occasion on which God is 'with', that is in the presence of, humankind. Joseph's acknowledgement of the prophecy of the Nativity, though dismissed in the long address to the audience with which he opens the next play (Pewterers and Founders, Play 13), is followed as he enters the Virgin's house with

All hayle, God be hereinne, 13: 75

which is also proleptic, but now also ironic, given Joseph's state of spiritual blindness.

It is the Nativity (Tilethatchers, Play 14), however, which establishes the rhetorical pattern for formally recognising Christ. Here the use of this specific paraliturgical interpolation becomes clearest, as one would expect, as the play enacts the first moment of God's Real Presence on earth. York's audaciously simple dramatisation of the Nativity, the only cycle play in which the birth of Christ takes place before the audience, clearly parallels the Nativity with the consecration of the Host, as Mary greets her newborn son with an elevation lyric full of the commonplace and characteristic paradoxes:

Hayle my lord God, hayle prince of pees,  
Hayle my fadir, and hayle my sone;  
Hayle souereyne sege all synnes to sesse,  
Hayle God and man in erth to wonne.  
Hayle, thurgh whos myht  
All þis worlde was first begonne,  
Merknes and light. 14: 56-63

## THE YORK PLAYS AND THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI

Here there is a link to be made with Host miracles where the Eucharist is transformed into a babe, notably in the celebrated vision of Edward the Confessor.<sup>41</sup> In the York *Nativity* play, the Virgin Mary is, according to the logic of the piece, a type of priest, able to 'make God', the bringing forth that the priest performed sacramentally being what the Virgin achieved physically at the Incarnation. The staging of this episode always presents problems to modern directors and commentators who see it as 'woman gives birth on stage' and muse as to why the dramatist chose to deal with the event in this way instead of offering distracting action as the other cycle dramatists do in presenting the Nativity. I am now convinced that there is only one way to present this scene and that is with the Virgin kneeling, with her back to the audience, producing the 'baby' from where it is concealed in her clothing then gently but firmly lifting it above her head with both hands while uttering her words of greeting, in explicit imitation of the celebrant at Mass.

Joseph, on the other hand, is more representative of the pious layman, who recognises God's presence on earth because of a shining light. The connection between the Nativity and light was popularised in the writings of St Birgitta of Sweden:

suddenly in a moment and the twinkling of an eye she gave birth to her son, from whom proceeded such an indescribable light and splendour, that the sun could not be compared to it; nor did the candle that St Joseph had put there give any light at all, because that divine radiance had totally annihilated the material radiance of the candle ... I saw that glorious infant lying on the ground naked and shining brilliantly. His flesh was completely clear of any kind of filth or uncleanness.<sup>42</sup>

There is also an inherent and touching reciprocity between the light spontaneously emitted into the darkness by divinity from the moment of its arrival on earth, and the light painstakingly provided for the consecrated Host by the faithful the better to see God. Joseph, returning to the stable with his meagre candle, as so often illustrated in contemporary Nativity scene, is in their vanguard. In the York play, Joseph greets the infant:

Nowe welcome, floure fairest of hewe,  
I shall þe menske with mayne and myght.  
Hayle my maker, hayle Crist Jesu,  
Hayle riall kyng, roote of all right,

Hayle saueour.  
Hayle my lorde, lemer of light,  
Hayle blessid floure.

14: 101–112

Had the York *Shepherds* play (Chandlers, Play 15) been complete, the shepherds would undoubtedly have welcomed the Christ Child in much the same way, as they do in both Towneley pageants. The greeting of Pastor II in the Towneley *Prima Pastorum* particularly illustrates the formula's power to express succinctly the mystery of the nature of the Incarnation:

Hayll, lytyll tyn mop,  
    Rewarder of mede!  
Hayll! bot oone drop  
    Of grace at my nede!  
Hayll lytyll mylksop!  
    Hayll, Daudid sede!  
Of oure crede thou art crop:  
    Hayll, in Godhede!  
    This ball  
    That thou wold resaeue!  
    Lytyll is that I haue;  
    This wyll I vowchesaue,  
    To play the withall.<sup>43</sup>

674–85

As things stand, in John Clerke's words, 'here wantes the conclusyon of this matter'.<sup>44</sup> But the *Visit of the Magi* provides an opportunity for three striking sequential elevation lyrics, the first opening thus:

Hayle, þe fairest of felde, folke for to fynde,  
Fro the fende and his feeres faithefully vs fende;  
Hayll, þe best þat shall be borne to vnbynde  
All þe barnes þat are borne and in bale bende.

16: 309–12

This play (Masons and Goldsmiths, Play 16), performed on two waggons, provides a good example of how interpolated paraliturgical material works at a dramatic level which reaches beyond individual authorship in the cycle. This whole play, with its two locations of action, is given over to movement, as the Magi travel from place to place, and to instruction and debate, until finally it comes to rest, resolved into the formal static image of the gift-giving. (Much later in the cycle, the Butchers' play of the *Death*

of *Christ* operates similarly, alternating action with moments which offer a famous image for contemplation accompanied by lyric utterance, on that occasion deriving from the *planctus* tradition.)

The First King's speech hails the child as Defender from the Fiend and Harrower of Hell. He then asks Him to remember His people since He has come to earth 'misseis to amende'. He hails him as King of Kings who will be king in this place as 'all clergy has kende.' The whole pattern alternates focus between Christ and the supplicant. The Second King hails Him firstly as 'foode þat thy folke fully may feed'. Clearly in the context of a celebration of the sacrament of the altar, the use of the word *food* has a number of resonances. The *OED* indicates that it can mean any kind of sustenance, physical or spiritual, as well as 'that which is fed, a child, offspring'. Probably nothing more than 'child' is intended when Joseph says on his return to the stable, 'Well is me I bade this day / To se þis foode' (14: 90–91). But in the speech of the Second King, we seem to have another one of those paradoxical utterances about the nature of Christ, as that which requires to be fed, as feeder, and as food itself.<sup>45</sup> He goes on to use stock epithets contrasting newness and oldness, mutability and immutability, helplessness and power. He invokes the miracle of Christ's birth (and, by extension, of transubstantiation), 'Als þe gleme in þe glasse gladly þou glade', before going on to anticipate the Day of Judgement and to ask for salvation himself. The Third King also invokes Christ's power over the Devil and asks for personal salvation, but his speech focuses more nearly on the coming Passion.

The next two pageants in which Christ is greeted introduce a complication, for in these cases the greetings which I am explicitly connecting with the celebration of Corpus Christi are embedded within action which alludes to and derives from the liturgical treatment of other festive occasions in the calendar, Candlemas and Palm Sunday. The proposition that Corpus Christi as the quintessential affirmation of the faith should gather up into it all the other festive moments of the faith's annual round of celebration does not seem inherently problematic, but it is a complex argument the pursuance of which is beyond the bounds of this essay. However, within larger patterns which derive most directly from the Candlemas ritual, Simeon in the *Purification* pageant (Play 17: Hatmakers, Masons, and Labourers) embarks on an elaborate set-piece speech of welcome (358–427) in which he hails the baby in the usual manner, as son of the Virgin, Son of God, protector from evil, fragrant flower, protector of great and small, rose, unfading flower, and comforter, as the *Purification*

PAMELA M. KING

completes the sequence in the cycle of scenes which formally recognise the presence of Christ as sacrificial infant.<sup>46</sup>

The most arresting sequence of greetings of Christ incarnate in the cycle greet Him as a man, at the climax of the entry into Jerusalem which opens the Passion sequence (Skinners, Play 25: 489–544.) Martin Stevens set up a reading of the civic and processional resonances of this episode which I shall summarise briefly as a context for a long series of formulaic elevation lyrics, spoken by the eight burgesses of Jerusalem with which this play ends. For Stevens the episode foregrounds ‘York’s obsession with civic ceremony and self celebration’, enacting and mimicking the Corpus Christi procession from which the plays emanate. The play, therefore, ‘focused attention on the cycle itself and on the occasion of its performance and thus caused the city to become identified with the dramatic subject being enacted’, that is the city of Jerusalem as sanctified place.<sup>47</sup> Stevens goes on to argue that the Royal Entry as dramatic form mediates these meanings, but equally the form of greeting, invoking Christ’ sacramental presence, also proposes that by the transformational power of the host, York and Jerusalem are one and the same place. The form of the burgesses’ final speeches of welcome contribute to its indissoluble allying of the ecclesiastical and the secular, as Christ is welcomed as prophet, king, physician, salve, Bethlehem babe, balm, ‘comely corse’, lantern, and, ultimately, judge.

As the Passion sequence progresses, Judas is to use the same formula to identify and betray Christ (Cordwainers, Play 28: 248–51), it will be abused in greetings to Pilate and ultimately subverted by Pilate’s soldiers in a speech which depends for its whole ironic force on what has gone before:<sup>48</sup>

Aue, riall roy and *rex judeorum*,  
Hayle, comely kyng þat no kyngdom has kende.  
Hayll vndugthy duke, þi dedis ere dom,  
Hayll, man vnmyghty þi men3é to mende.  
Hayll, lord without lande for to lende,  
Hayll kyng, hayll knave unconand.  
Hayll, freyke without forse þe to fende.  
Hayll strang, þat may not wele stand  
To stryve. Tilemakers, 33: 408–416

Thereafter there follow a number of speeches in the plays of the *Death*, *Assumption*, and *Coronation of the Virgin*, all addressed to the Virgin and therefore conventional *Salves*, including those addressed to her by Christ.<sup>49</sup>

Particularly the last of these reverses the consecration pattern as earth is welcomed into heaven. I want to close, however, by looking at the final play in the sequence, the *Last Judgement* (Mercers, Play 47), where there are no elevation lyrics, but where the logic of the sacramental pattern which they have established is central to the episode's wider meaning for its community.

The Last Judgement works as an enacted Host miracle: *Corpus Christi* does descend among the people and those who are saved are those who, like the members of the Corpus Christi Guild, have endeavoured to perform significant corporal acts of mercy. The play opens with a reprise of the story of the whole cycle, relating beginnings to endings, the *alpha* to the *omega*. After this brief account the pageant contains a half stanza which suggests that since ('sethen') the Harrowing of Hell, 'in erthe than gonne he [Christ] dwelle' (37-40), giving humankind example of how to attain heaven. What is referred to is the continuing presence of Christ on earth. Angels then stress that everyone should 'fetch' their flesh and appear 'body and soul together clean'. Christ the Judge then descends. The moment before it he says:

To deme my domes I woll descende;  
 Bis body will I bere with me —  
 How it was dight, mannes mys to mende,  
 All mankynde þere schall it see.

47: 181-4

His transportation of the wounded body to earth, familiar from the Mass of St Gregory and other Host miracles,<sup>50</sup> reciprocates the reuniting of bodies and souls of the saved and damned, but also enacts for all time and from a heavenly perspective, the moment of consecration of the Host, when Christ comes among his people. In what follows, the doctrine of the corporal acts of mercy becomes a sign of the presence of Christ in the midst of the society of believers.

The persistent reading of the York Cycle is as dramatised biblical narrative produced as an adjunct to the feast of Corpus Christ. Its authors' interpretations of that narrative are identified from patristic and contemporary devotional writing to which they would have had access. What is consistently underplayed in readings of the cycles is the pervasive influence of the forms and patterns of worship, not just in the obvious places, like the Baptism and the Last Supper, but as part of the texture of the whole cycle. Yet this is the experience of their faith which authors, performers, and audience would have shared.

PAMELA M. KING

Here I have shown that specific verbal echoes of a common form of paraliturgical prayer which marked the climax of the Mass for the laity, the elevation of the Host, are regularly employed by the cycle's authors to draw analogies between the historical moments when the Deity assumed flesh, and the doctrine of transubstantiation. These contributions to the overall verbal texture of the cycle accord in turn with the contemporary doctrinal moves to re-emphasise the importance of the Eucharist, something which appears to have penetrated York lay devotional tastes, not only in the formation of the Corpus Christi Guild, but in more general patterns of testamentary bequests. According to Eamon Duffy, 'the host ... was far more than the object of individual devotion, a means of forgiveness and sanctification: it was the source of human community':<sup>51</sup> this is what the York Cycle of plays articulates in celebration of Corpus Christi.

*St Martin's College, Lancaster*

#### NOTES

1. See for example 'Calendar and Text: Christ's Ministry in the York Plays and the Liturgy' *Medium Aevum* 67 (1998) 30–59.
2. Serious critical exploration may be dated from V.A. Kolve *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Edward Arnold, London, 1966), and has recently included Miri Rubin *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge UP, 1991), Eamon Duffy *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (Yale UP, New Haven, 1992), and Sarah Beckwith *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (Routledge, London, 1993).
3. See most recently, Alexandra Johnston 'What if no Texts Survived? External Evidence for Early English Drama' in *Contexts for Early English Drama* edited Marianne G. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey (Indiana UP, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989) 11.
4. 'The Guild of Corpus Christi and the Procession of Corpus Christi in York' *Medieval Studies* 38 (1976) 372–84, 373.
5. *The Register of the Guild of Corpus Christi in the City of York* edited Robert H. Skaife (Surtees Society 57: 1871); for the text of the indenture see *Records of Early English Drama: York* edited Alexandra Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, 2 vols (Toronto UP, 1978) 1 55.

THE YORK PLAYS AND THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI

6. See Meg Twycross 'Some Aliens in York and their Overseas Connections: up to c. 1470' in *Essays in Honour of Peter Meredith* edited by Catherine Batt *Leeds Studies in English NS 29* (1998) 359–80.
7. *Register of the Guild of Corpus Christi* edited Skaife, see year lists; first appointment of master and keepers which includes Holbek is reproduced 256-8.
8. Twycross 'Some Aliens in York'.
9. The wills of many York mayors of this period are reproduced in English translation and in full in a series of seven pamphlets: R. B. Cooke *Some Early Civic Wills of York* (Publications of the York Architectural and York Archaeological Societies: undated); Bedale in 7: 10; Usflete, in 7: 12.
10. All following references to mayors' wills refer to Cooke's pamphlets by volume number and page, except in the case of Nicholas Blackburn.
11. P. J. Shaw *The Church of All Hallows North Street, York* (The Church Shop, All Saints' North Street, York, 1908) 90–91.
12. Cooke *Early Civic Wills* 6: 7.
13. William Holbek who appears in the Mercers' indenture was executor to both John and Thomas Alstanemore and was left two gowns by the former (5: 7). Alstanemore's daughter appears to have been Holbek's wife, as her son is named as John Holbek. Agnes Alstanemore, wife of John, also mentions her daughter Agnes, wife of William Holbek in her will (5: 9). John Alstanemore was in turn one of the executors of Nicholas Blackburn.
14. Cooke *Early Civic Wills* 6: 11.
15. Cooke *Early Civic Wills* 6: 13.
16. Cooke *Early Civic Wills* 7: 7.
17. Shaw *All Hallows North Street* 90.
18. Cooke *Early Civic Wills* 6: 3.
19. Cooke *Early Civic Wills* 4: 3.
20. Cooke *Early Civic Wills* 4: 7.
21. Nicholas Love *Mirroure of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686* edited Michael G. Sargent (Garland, New York and London, 1992) and Ian Doyle 'Reflections on Some Manuscripts of Nicholas Love's *Myrroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*' in *Essays in Memory of Elizabeth Salter: Leeds Studies in English NS 14* (1983) 82–93, follow Elizabeth Salter in affirming Love's probable origins.
22. Sargent *Mirroure* li: embedded within this is 'a formal scholastic statement of the orthodox doctrine concerning the eucharist':
 

þe which feiþ is þis short wordes, þat þe sacrament of þe autere dewly made by vertue of cristes wordes is verrey goddus body in forme of

brede, & his verray blode in forme of wyne, & þouh þat forme of brede & wyne seme as to alle þe bodily wittes of man brede & wyne in his kynde as it was before. Neuerles it is not so in soþenesse, bot onely goddus flesh and blode in substance, so þat þe accidentes of brede & wyne wondrously & myraclesly æynus mannus reson, & þe commune ordre of kynde bene þere in þat holi sacrament without hir kyndely subiecte, & verray cristes body þat suffrede deþ vpon the crosse is þere in þar sacrament bodily vnder þe forme and liknes of brede, & his verrey blode vnder likenes of wyne ...

23. Ian Doyle 'Reflections on Some Manuscripts of Nicholas Love's *Myrrour*' 82-93.
24. 'Two Middle English Versions of a Prayer to the Sacrament' *Archiv NS* 194 (1957) 113-21; for Suso's text edited K. Horstmann see *Anglia* 10 (1888) 323-89.
25. Sargent xxii, and Doyle 82, concur that Love was probably from Essex.
26. *Love* edited Sargent xxiv.
27. Jonathan Hughes *Pastors and Visionaries: Religion and Secular Life in Late Medieval Yorkshire* (Boydell, Press Cambridge, 1988) 288-9.
28. The almost total absence of bequests from York citizens to the major Benedictine abbey of St Mary's immediately outside their walls provides powerful negative evidence that town and gown relations remained strained during this period.
29. Rubin *Corpus Christi* 55-64.
30. John Lydgate 'The Virtues of the Mass', in *Minor Poems of John Lydgate I* edited H. N. McCracken *EETS ES* 107 (1911) 119.
31. John Myrc *Instructions for Parish Priests* edited E. Peacock *EETS OS* 31 (1868) lines 316-29.
32. *The Lay Folks' Mass Book* edited T. F. Simmons *EETS OS* 71 (1879) 131, lines 101-24 (Vernon MS).
33. R. N. Swanson 'Problems of the Priesthood in Pre-Reformation England' *English Historical Review* 105 (1990) 845-69, especially 855-7 discusses the respective balance of power between clergy and laity in this period of increased focus on the Eucharist:

The developments in this relationship centred on the cult of the Eucharist, both as a spiritual and a 'magical' event. As only the priest could consecrate, only the priest could 'make God'. The increasingly mystical element of the mass, where each vestment, ornament, and action had its own meaning as a reminder of Christ's earthly life and sufferings, could serve only to elevate the status of the priest as Christ-maker, and increase his separation from the laity ... This elevation of the priest as consecrator clearly meshed with the acceptance of the host

THE YORK PLAYS AND THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI

as Christ, which came close to (and for Wyclif was) idolatry. The veneration of the host was a burgeoning element in the spirituality of the late Middle Ages, which tied in intimately with the developing cult of Corpus Christi.

34. *Lay Folks' Mass Book* 38–40, lines 401–437 (Text B); *Myrc Instructions* lines 284–303.
35. Still the most useful collation of the sub-genre is R. H. Robbins 'Levation Prayers in Middle English Verse' *Modern Philology* 40 (1942–3) 131–46. Robbins noted that these prayers were quintessentially a vernacular accretion to spiritual literature, being either the only vernacular items in Latin manuscripts, or turning up in miscellany of what he called 'household devotions':

Levation prayers, then, were primarily a native growth, the result of this emotional need for expression in the mother-tongue of deep personal thoughts by the worshippers rather than mere translations of well known Latin prayers. 32–3.

See also his 'Popular Prayers in Middle English Verse' *Modern Philology* 36 (1938–39) 337–50; 'Private Prayers in Middle English Verse' *Studies in Philology* 36 (1939) 466–75 and 'The Gurney Series of Religious Lyrics' *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America* 54 369–90.
36. Eamon Duffy *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (Yale UP, New Haven, 1992) 120.
37. Andrew Hughes *Medieval Manuscripts for Mass and Office: A Guide to their Organisation and Terminology* (Toronto UP, 1982) paragraphs 511, 513, 514.
38. Hughes *Medieval Manuscripts* paragraph 217.
39. *REED: York* 1 155.
40. Quoted from Robbins 'Levation Prayers' 136–7.
41. *Aelred of Rivaulx's Life of St Edward* translated J. Bertram (London, 1990) 71–3. This dimension of eucharistic imagery in English medieval drama as a whole is thoroughly explored in Leah Sinanoglou 'The Christ Child as Sacrifice: a Medieval Tradition and the Corpus Christi Plays' *Speculum* 48 (1973) 491–509, but focusing on iconographic rather than verbal resonances.
42. See Meg Twycross 'As the Sun with his Beams when he is Most Bright' *Medieval English Theatre 12:1* (1990) 34–76, at 45, translating from the Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden: *Revelations Liber VII* edited Birger Bergh (Samlinger utgivna av Svnska Fornskriftsallskapet Series 2, Band 7:7: Almqvist & Wiksells, Uppsala 1967) 188–9. This article also traces the accounts of emanations of light from the Virgin and Christ at the moment of the Nativity through a number of Latin commentators further to illustrate the association of light with the physical presence of the divine on earth.

PAMELA M. KING

43. *The Towneley Plays* edited Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley, 2 vols, *EETS SS 13 and 14* (1994) 1 125, lines 674–85.
44. *The York Plays* edited Richard Beadle (Arnold, London, 1982) 133 note 131.
45. Sinanoglou 'Christ Child as Sacrifice' 504–5, connects the image both with the placing of the baby on the altar in Latin liturgical drama of the Nativity, and with the secular Christmas feasting of shepherds in the cycles, which has been explained in terms of the frequent pairing of spiritual and earthly feeding in works of popular piety, notably in explanations of the Lord's Prayer, 'Give us this day our daily bread'. All these meanings may be latent, but here, because of the form of the presentation speeches as elevation lyrics, and the conventional ways of venerating the real presence which draw on the same form, the analogy with Corpus Christi is made without the need to invoke mediating forms and rituals.
46. Since first working on this paper, I have realised that Simeon's greeting is part of a more complex paraliturgical movement, and that the dramatist of this pageant is drawing selectively from the available readings of Candlemas to create a version of the episode which best integrates the resonances of that feast with the feast which the plays exist to celebrate. This will be the subject of a further paper.
47. Martin Stevens *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton UP, 1987) 52.
48. At this point I must acknowledge that when we were collaborating to produce a modern spelling selection from the York Cycle *York Mystery Plays* (Oxford, 1984) Richard Beadle drew my attention to the parodic force of this speech. That conversation was the genesis of this article.
49. 44: 1–4; 45: 132–43; 46: 37–44; 89–92; 46a: 1–4.
50. Eamon Duffy *Stripping of the Altars* 238–40, traces the relationship between this Host miracle and popular devotion to the Five Wounds.
51. Duffy *Stripping of the Altars* 92.