THE 'NOW' OF 'THEN'

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The focus of my paper is Chester's Play of *Antichrist*. I want to argue that there is a particular appropriateness in having that episode in Chester's civic cycle because Chester shows a concern with the past that is not found in York's play. And I want to suggest that that distinction may have something to do with different attitudes towards accessing spiritual truth which may relate to the dates of the two cycles. But first I want to consider how some non-dramatic writers access the biblical past.

Affective Piety

> To the whiche symple soules / as seint Bernard seith / contemplacioun of the manhede of criste is more lykynge / more spedeful / and more siker than is hi3e contemplacioun of the godhede ... / a symple soule that kan not thenke bot bodies or bodily thinges mowe haue somwhat accordynge vnto his affeccioun wherwith he may fede and stire his deuocioun.[1]

Nicholas Love, prior to Mount Grace Priory, setting out his agenda of empathetic devotion at the start of his *Mirror of the Blissid Lyf of Iesu Christe* some time pre-1410 probably would not have envisaged the full potential of this approach. Ironically, it is in a manuscript at one time kept at Mount Grace that we have the clearest evidence of what a simple soul thinking bodies might make of such an approach.

Margery Kempe's visions have a startling literalism and immediacy about them. One short example must suffice — she envisions herself attending the Virgin Mary at the Crucifixion and returning home with her:

> Than þe creatur thowt, whan owr Lady was comyn hom & was leyd down on a bed, þan she mad for owr Lady a good cawdel & browt it hir to comfortyn hir, and þan owr Lady seyd on-to hir, 'Do it a-wey, dowtyr. 3eue me no mete but myn owyn childe.' Þe creatur seyd a3en 'A, blissid Lady, 3e must nedys comfortyn 3owr-self & cesyn of 3owr sorwyng'. 'A, dowtyr, wher xulde I gon er wher xulde I dwellyn wyth-owtyn sorwe? I telle þe certeyn was þer neuyr

> woman in erth had so gret cawse to sorwyn as I haue, for þer was neuyr woman in þis world bar a bettyr childe ne a mekar to hys modyr than my Sone was to me'. And hir thowt sche herd owr Lady cryin a-non wyth a lamentabyl voys & seyd 'Iohn, wher is my Sone Ihesu Christ?' & Seynt Iohn answeryd a-ȝen & seyd, 'Der Lady, ȝe wetyn wel þat he is ded.' 'A, Iohn,' sche seyd, 'that is to me a careful reed.' The creatur herd as clerly þis answer in þe vnderstondying of hir sowle as sche xulde vndirstondyn o man spekyn to an-oþer.[2]

Margery has transported the Crucifixion from the past to the present and then produced an empathetic continuation of it which strikes us today as the product of one experienced in the behaviour of funeral parties — the chief mourner prostrate with grief, unable still to come to terms with past or future; the close friend offering comforting drinks; the male friend trying to make her face the truth. And within this highly dramatic realisation, so vivid that Margery says that it is as if she physically heard it, Margery has scripted for herself a minor support-role.

A more sophisticated writer than Margery, able to think more than 'bodies', had already gone further down this line. William Langland's Dreamer Will, in Passus 16 of the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, sees in an inner dream the Tree of Charity growing in the garden of his own heart, a garden resonant of Eden:

> 'It groweth in a gardyn', quod he, 'that God made hymselve ...'[3]
>
> *Piers Plowman* B-text, Passus 16, 13

Will, having seen how the tree is protected by the Trinity against the World, Flesh, and Devil and noted its fruit as Marriage, Widowhood, and Virginity, asks casually to taste an apple. Piers, his guide, shakes the tree:

> And evere as thei dropped adoun devel was redy
> and gadrede hem alle todigeres, bothe grete and smale,
> Adam and Abraham and Ysaye the prophete,
> Sampson and Samuel, and Seint Iohan the Baptist,
> bar hem forth boldely, no body hym letted —
> and made of holy men his hoord in *Limbo inferni*.
>
> Passus 16, 79–84

Will commits the characteristic fault of the innocent abroad in an allegorical text, literalism. But, as with Margery, the past becomes present as the Fall is recapitulated in the heart of contemporary Man. Will thus

becomes the sinful heir of Adam's own Fall and therefore the agent of its continuing re-enactment. And Will must now read and enact the process of salvation history. He journeys forward, meeting in turn Abraham, then Moses, and finally the Good Samaritan, whom he follows to Jerusalem to witness the Crucifixion. As Passus 18 draws to its close we see him at the gate of Hell awaiting Christ's coming. He journeys through time. But not simply time, for we are told that Abraham represents Faith, Moses Hope, the Samaritan Human Charity. That historical journey is also an inner spiritual journey.

Audaciously, the pursuit of human charity by Man releases the reciprocal charity of God. Not for Will a mere support role. In following the Samaritan, he may be said not only to witness but actually to effect the Crucifixion and his own redemption. The 'then' of history becomes the 'now' of the Dreamer. All time converges upon and inheres within him and the vision therefore attains transcendental potential.

On-going Passion and Redemption

Can these texts tell us anything about the way our two civic cycles access the past? An indication that they may, may lie in the connection of civic cycles with the Feast of Corpus Christi, the celebration of transubstantiation which releases the on-going sacrificial grace of Christ. In the plays too we have the image of that continuing sacrifice of Christ, on-going throughout time.

In Chester's *Domesday* Play, Christ reminds the audience that His sufferings continue through time:

> For my bodye ys all torent
> with othes false alwayes fervent
> noe lymme on mee but yt is lent
> from head right to the heels. *24*: 417–20

The claim is then reinforced visually by a stage-effect which Christ announces:

> Owe that you shall appertyle see
> freche blood bleede, man, for thee —
> good to joye and full greate lee,
> The evyll to damnatyon *24*: 421–4

and the stage-direction insists

> Tunc emittet sanguinem de latere eius. 24: sd at 428

The same effect was evidently staged in Towneley's play: witness the line 'To se his Woundes bledande, this is a dulfull case' (30:53). And the same emphasis can be found outside the cycles, in the Croxton *Sacrament*:

> Why blaspheme yow me? Why do ye thus?
> Why put yow me to a newe tormentry? 731–2

as well as from Chaucer's Pardoner and Parson.[4]

I have been pondering the possible implications of this approach for our understanding of medieval drama. We have become accustomed, perhaps because of our interest in the Shakespearean Chronicle Play, to describe the play-cycle as history plays and to see the contemporary allusions as means of access to a lost past. V.A Kolve puts it like this:

> The pervasive anachronism of costume and setting, and the occasional imaginative anachronism of a text, allowed these cycles [an] address to that part of the sixth age in which its audience lived, a part which the formal design of the drama neglected.[5]

Perhaps, instead of thinking of these devices as means of accessing a past, we should rather consider the past as actualised within the present throughout the cycles. Whether we are actor, like Margery, or spectator, like Langland's narrator observing Will access those events, we are reaching into a select set of events that exist out of time. The actor represents the audience in several senses of that verb, as Will represents his reader, giving contemporary Man a rôle in a constantly on-going process in which the events strung linearly in processional staging are actualised by contemporary society who, like Langland's Dreamer, are agents of the pre-ordained history of salvation but a recognition of choices made repeatedly as we re-enact within our own lives and landscapes, internal and external, the processes of our continuing salvation and damnation.

We are, I would submit, not aware of the pastness of events in fifteenth-century texts such as York or Towneley. To cite just one example. The soldiers who crucify Christ in York crucify Him anew; His words from the Cross do not address an audience to whom the rôle of Jews had been assigned by the text, but remind them that they are daily re-enacting this process of crucifixion unknowingly and mindlessly. Like Will, they cannot read what they see:

> My fadir, that alle bales may bete
> forgiffis thes men that dois me pyne
> what thai wirke wotte thay noght. York *35*: 259–60

The scene has become that of a wayside crucifix, come to life, what the supporters of such drama would, according to the *Tretise*, call 'a quik' sculpture. 'Then' becomes 'now'.

Chester Historical History Play

In Chester's late Tudor Whitsun Play, by contrast, 'then' is clearly distinguished from 'now'. This cycle makes the passage of time explicit; the past serves as a benchmark for progress to the present and the audience is expressly asked to recognise continuity in change. A few examples must suffice: the Expositor in Play 4 comments on Abraham's offering to Melchisadek,

> In the owld lawe, without leasinge
> when these two good men were livinge,
> of beastes were there offeringe
> and eke there sacramente.
> But synce Christe dyed one rood-tree
> in bred and wyne his death remember we *4*: 121–6

distinguishing the past from contemporary eucharistic commemoration (*remember*); or the Doctor to Herod in Play 8:

> by succession to claime the scepter and regaltye;
> wherfore Christe is nowe borne our kinge and messye
> 8: 280–2

where *nowe* marks the passage of time; or Christ at the Last Supper in Play 15:

> For knowe you nowe, the tyme is come
> that sygnes and shadowes be all donne
> Therefore make haste, that we may soone
> all figures cleane reject
> For nowe a new lawe I will beginne *15*: 69–73

where *new lawe* takes up the Expositor's reference in Play 5 to 'the first lawe that ever God sent' (5: 42). Such lines make clear the succession from Jew (Abraham and Moses) to Roman (Octavian) and thence to contemporary Gentile. We see here a cycle in human time, a succession of

events, progressively revealing God's purpose. In this sequence, only the on-going sacrifice of Christ can be read out of time.

Why Chester approaches its subject in this way is open to conjecture, but the inclusion of supersession within the text is complemented by the Later Banns' insistence that the cycle itself emblematises that passage of time towards reform. From their opening, these Banns defend the cycle as a product of a particular age:

> Reverend lordes and ladyes all
> that at this tyme here assembled be
> by this message understande you shall
> that sometymes there was mayor of this cittie
> Sir John Arnewaye 1–5

the opposition of *at this tyme* and *sometymes* signals the gulf between the contemporary audience and the drama they will witness. The reference to Sir John Arneway and the later reference to the deviser of the plays, Ranulf Higden, locates the cycle's origins within the supposed history of the city. Higden himself was an acknowledged historian. And references to the plays appear in the various annals of Mayors' Lists which chart the succession of civic leaders (mayors and sheriffs) and, increasingly from the later fifteenth century, information about their periods of office. The plays belong to the city's past. The point is driven home in the account of the production:

> that not possible it is those matters to be contryved
> in such sorte and cunninge and by suche players of price
> as at this date good players and fine witte could devise 193–5

where *at this daye* again sets a gulf between past and present, in execution and hence in the expectations of the audience. Above all, the plays belong to a Roman Catholic past, as David Rogers states in his *Breviary*:

> But oh the merscie of oure God: for the tyme of oure ignorance he regardes it not.[7]

This recollection of the unreformed Church of *the tyme of oure ignorance* is tempered in later versions as the threat of the reversal of Reformation recedes. Rogers believes the author had 'noe euill Intension, but secrett deuotion there in soe also the Cittizen that did acte and practize the same to their gret coste'.[8]

Antichrist[9]

But given this emphasis, it is understandable that Chester should include a play of the present within its historical sequence. One version of that play, *Antichrist*, described in the Later Banns, is not the version extant:

> And then, yow Diers and Hewsters, Antechriste bringe oute —
> Firste with his Doctor that godlye maye expownde
> Whoe be Antechristes the worlde rownde aboute.
> And Enocke and Helye, personnes walkinge on grownde,
> In partes well sett yow out, the wicked to confownde;
> Which, beinge understanded Christes word for to be,
> Confowndethe all Antechristes and sectes of that degree.
>
> Late Banns 173–8[10]

That text interpreted the two prophets who confront Antichrist as the voice of the Scriptures and employed them to identify and confound with the Gospel all Antichrists and 'sectes of that degree'. The verb-tense is tellingly present. Evidently this was religious polemic, employing Antichrist in the familiar role of the opponents of the true faith. As Christopher Hill has shown: 'By the time of Elizabeth's accession the doctrine that the Pope was Antichrist had acquired a theoretical respectability'.[11] So that version is likely to have been expressly anti-Catholic and hence clearly controversial and illegal.

What we have is a much toned-down account, following more closely Adso's *Libellus de Antechristo*.[12] Antichrist becomes less precisely identified, more open to contemporary interpretation. Again to quote Hill: 'Antichrist stood for bad, papal, repressive institutions; exactly which institutions was anybody's choice'.[13]

The Play, of course, plays an initial trick upon us, with double-edged effect. Antichrist's opening speech suggests what I would term a 'present future', in which he introduces himself as Christ. The trick is compounded by an ambiguous 'Hee' in the last speech of the preceding play, which could refer to either God or Antichrist. The result is that until line 25 the audience might believe they are witnessing a *Domesday* play. Only then, when Antichrist separates himself from the historical Jesu who 'hath ligged him here' (25) do we realise that this is the present day and that we are under Antichrist's reign. Like the kings in the play, we have been deceived.

Nevertheless, the play still speaks to the present. Claiming power through miracles, constructing his own temple (37–8) and setting up his

throne it (*sd* at 181), claiming the right to consecrate kings and allocate lands (213–20), in Protestant England Antichrist is open to the reading of papal authority. But in Chester, a town with a strong Puritan faction, and the surrounding parishes, many of whose clergy were in dispute with their own Church over vestments and ceremonies that might well have included their own bishops as servants of the Antichrist. Certainly,

> Thou hast deceaved men manye a daye
> and made the people to thy paye
> and bewitched them into a wrong waye
> wickedlye with thy wyles *23*: 345–8

would have particular resonance for a contemporary audience, while the parodic anathematisation of the two prophets (432–50) — the promise of solemn excommunication in 1570 was generally greeted. The king's repeated recognition that they have been 'brought in heresy' (590, compare 600) completes that identification.

Antichrist marks the end of the process of salvation history traced by the cycle. What gives him his power is human gullibility, the clinging to a language of signs and miracles, 'bodily thinges' valid to the 'symple soules' of the past, when we have today the faith and the means to make trial of false prophets. The cycle addresses the religious confusion confronting its sixteenth-century audiences. Antichrist's belief that by imitating the signs of Christ he can convert the world to his values will, as prophesied, be destroyed. He, like all the other characters in this cycle, exists within the time, not above it, and is therefore no different from all mortals:

> The were no myracles but marvelles thinges
> that thou shewed unto these kinges
> through the fendes crafte
> And as the flower nowe springes
> falleth, fadeth and hanges
> so is thy joye; nowe it raygnes
> that shalbe from thee rafte *23*: 41–16

Past, present, and future are enacted — *were*, *nowe springes*, *nowe it raygens*; but it *shalbe* removed. Present will become past. Miracles are past their sell-by date; the devils prove unable to eat the bread which Elijah has blessed. The Eucharist alone is sufficient. Salvation is achieved through faith:

> All that leeven in thee stydfastlye
> thou helpes, lord, from all anoye *23*: 711–12

This is not an appeal to 'symple soules' who can recognise only 'bodies', just as the audience is no longer 'comon and contry folk'.

Nevertheless, as Travis points our, the play offers no strong hope to its immediate audience:

> A series of implicit questions are raised concerning the powers in this world of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Antichrist may be a fraud, yet his magic is weak; the four kings are good, but they are weak in discerning the truth; truth, represented by the two prophets, cannot defeat fraud by using exclusively human powers; even when exposed to a higher degree of power, fraud has the power to kill; the only power that in fact can kill fraud is the power of God himself.[14]

The play is a warning to the servants of God to remain steadfast, even to martyrdom. There is no immediate solution; when Antichrist is defeated theologically, he returns with military force. Again we note the contemporary relevance. But it is the Archangel Michael who slays Antichrist. If Antichrist represents an infernal secular authority, Michael represents a divinely ordained one. The play's ending offers the potential of a political reading, of the power of heresy at last defeated by the chosen of God — 'nowe ys common this daye' (605). Michael, that is, has the role taken by Imperial Majesty in Bale's *King Iohan*.[15]

The contemporary allusiveness of the *Antichrist* play suggests that Chester is redefining the medieval cycle play, turning it into something more recognisable as a history play. The present is defined now as the product of the past, rather than being the site in which the past is re-actualised. And that, perhaps, signals an important difference between the medieval and Tudor attitudes to salvation history.

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NOTES

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1. Nicholas Love *The Mirror of the Blissid Lyf of Iesu Christe* edited Lawrens F. Powell (Henry Frowde, London, 1908) 8–9.

2. *The Book of Margery Kempe* edited S. B. Meech *EETS ES 212* (1940) 195.
3. Quotations from William Langland *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-text* edited A.V.C. Schmidt (Dent, London, revised edition, 1987).
4. *The Riverside Chaucer* edited L. D. Benson (Oxford University Press, 3rd edition 1989) *Pardoner's Tale* VI 708–9; *Parson's Tale* X 591–6.
5. V. A. Kolve *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford UP, California, 1966) 110.
6. *The York Plays* edited Richard Beadle (Arnold, London, 1982).
7. *REED: Chester* edited L. M. Clopper (Toronto UP, 1974).
8. *REED: Chester* 436.
9. For further studies of Antichrist and related drama, see R.K. Emmerson, *Antichrist in the Middle Ages* (Manchester UP, 1981) 1; R.K. Emmerson, '"Nowe Ys Common This Daye": Enoch and Elias, Antichrist, and the Structure of the Chester Cycle' in *'Homo, Memento Finis': The Iconography of Just Judgement in Medieval Art and Drama* edited David Bevington and others (Early Art, Drama and Music Monograph Series 6: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, 1985) 89–120; *Antichrist and Judgement Day: The Middle French 'Jour de Judgement'* edited and translated Richard K. Emmerson and David F. Hult (Early European Drama Translation: Pegasus Press, Asheville, North Carolina, 1998).
10. Quotations from R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1983).
11. Christopher Hill *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford UP, London, 1971) 13.
12. Adso Deruensis *De ortu et tempore antichristi* edited D. Verhelst (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 45: Brepols, Turnhout, 1976).
13. Hill Antichrist 44.
14. Peter W. Travis *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle* (University of Chicago Press, 1982) 13.
15. See further Carol Z. Weiner 'The Beleaguered Isle: A Study in Elizabethan and Early Jacobean Anti-Catholicism' *Past and Present 51* (May 1971) 27–62. Weiner claims that in the early years of Elizabeth's reign it was hoped that 'Elizabeth would in the immediate future inaugurate a godly reign climaxing centuries of struggle for purity within the English Church' (57).