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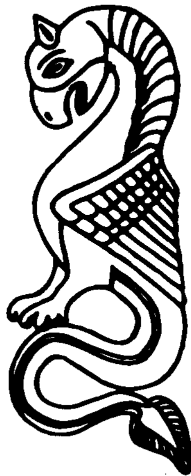

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School of English
University of Leeds
http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse

APPROACHES TO MEDIEVAL DRAMA[1]

By DAVID MILLS

Until fairly recently, critics of medieval literature were fairly sure of their critical ground. Their task was to promote a full understanding of a text by placing it within its appropriate context, which was possibly literary, more probably social and philosophical, and almost certainly linguistic. But in recent years something of a revolution has occurred in the criticism of medieval literature, and critics would probably now reverse this order of evaluative contexts and place the literary evaluation first. At the same time, there is considerably variety in the critical standards adopted, ranging from attempts to treat medieval literature as if it were modern literature to criticisms which propound specifically "medieval" standards of evaluation.

Medieval drama has not been a central issue in the critical discussions about medieval literature, mainly because critics of medieval drama have come under the dominating influence of E. K. Chambers' two-volume work, *The Mediaeval Stage*.[2] Published in 1903 and written in a tradition of historical criticism, Chambers' thorough and scholarly work traced the development of theatre from the decline of the classical stage to the beginnings of the Elizabethan stage, and focused attention upon two points in that development, the liturgical plays and the vernacular play-cycles, which are linked by a process called "secularization." Chambers' work has been developed by writers such as Young[3] and Craig,[4] and his convenient framework of historical development has been accepted by many critics of the vernacular cycles.[5] The many interrelated presuppositions behind this historical approach have seldom been seriously questioned.

Now, however, the critical revolution which has taken place in other fields of medieval literature is reaching the drama. O. B. Hardison has compelled us to reconsider the liturgical drama in its liturgical context[6] and V. A. Kolve has advanced a theory of the construction of the cycles which divorces them to a large degree from the liturgy.[7] The historical approach is being questioned, a development which I welcome for reasons stated below; but critics may now be tempted to react excessively against this approach, rejecting some of its valid conclusions and perhaps over-emphasizing doctrinal influences upon the plays. I suggest that any such tendency may be corrected by considering the cycles in relation to the long tradition of English vernacular poetry which precedes them, and by assessing the way in which audiences might respond to performances of the plays.[8]

Before beginning my discussion of the medieval drama, however, I would emphasize a problem of terminology which is connected with the general problem of critical standards. In discussing the range of medieval dramatic activities, from liturgical ritual to communal civic celebrations, it is convenient to employ terms such as *drama* and *play*, *dramatist* and *actor* to describe the text, its author and performers; and to use words such as *setting*, *dialogue*,

action, *structure*, *development* and *character* in analyzing these works. With the exception of *play*, which could refer to a theatrical performance even in Old English and which had acquired its modern sense of "a drama" before 1500,[9] this critical terminology is modern, either because the words themselves have entered the English language since 1500 or because they have been applied to drama only since that time.[10] The application of these terms, with all their modern connotations, to medieval dramatic activities may lead critics to dwell upon certain aspects of these activities, to the exclusion of other important features, and may suggest a degree of continuity between medieval and modern play-construction which is unhelpful or even misleading. It is extremely difficult to make clear distinctions between the various forms of dramatic activity in the Middle Ages, to determine the limits of the play, the liturgy, the civic procession, the sermon, the tournament, the dance. It is also uncertain how far the Middle Ages themselves were aware of the drama as a distinct genre. I do not wish to advocate a new critical terminology for medieval drama, but it will be necessary to consider what the familiar terms signify when applied to this drama.

The "Liturgical" Approach

Perhaps nowhere is it more important to be aware of the significance of traditional terminology than in the discussion of the beginnings of medieval drama. Critics who define drama as the coming-together of distinct elements, such as action, impersonation and dialogue,[11] have argued that the origins of medieval drama lie in the liturgical plays of the Church, themselves developments from earlier liturgical observances, and that the Latin liturgical drama evolves into vernacular drama by the growth of its constituent elements, which are still present in the later play-cycles. Such an idea underlies Chambers' account of secularization:

> The evolution of the liturgic play . . . may be fairly held to have been complete about the middle of the thirteenth century . . . The following hundred years are a transition period. During their course, the newly shaped drama underwent a process which, within the limits imposed by the fact that its subject-matter remained essentially religious, may be called secularization . . . From ecclesiastical the drama had become popular. Out of the hands of the clergy in their naves and choirs, it had passed to those of the laity in their market-places and guild-halls. And to this formal change corresponded a spiritual or literary one, in the reaction of the temper of the folk upon the handling of the plays, the broadening of their human as distinct from their religious aspect. In their origin *officia* for devotion and edification, they came, by an irony familiar to the psychologist, to be primarily *spectacula* for mirth, wonder and delight.[12]

It is clear that secularization, as here described, involves a number of transitions rather than a single process. The place of performance, the occupation of the actors and the language of composition all change, but it would seem (though this is not stated) that these transitions should be regarded as part of a single process because the basic elements of drama, present in Latin liturgical plays, remain in the vernacular forms. Hence, although it

is difficult to point to examples in which the three transitions are taking place simultaneously, Chambers stresses the continuity of development and treats the various transitions as the accidental results of a general expansion. The plays were forced through the west door of the church, the laity had to be co-opted to cope with the continued expansion of the plays, and odd lines of vernacular were slipped in here and there. Hence, the text outstrips the staging-resources of the church building, while at the same time the change in the staging produces changes in the text.

Yet it is improbable that such important changes could take place almost accidentally, and it is certain that they could not take place without fundamentally changing the nature and function of the drama. The liturgical plays of the Church were designed to be performed in Latin by clerics within the church, and their true context was one of the services for the day to which their subject related. The liturgical drama was an ancillary to worship, just like the tropes, lections, processions and symbols which played such an important part in its evolution. Development in this form is a process of expansion and amalgamation whereby one episode can serve as a growth point to which related episodes can be added.[13] Yet the liturgical context is the determining factor in this process, limiting the amount of development possible and providing the wider context in which the plays should be seen and understood. The result is that these plays cannot be considered as independent dramatic units, each with its own central theme and self-contained internal structure. Comparing even the most extensive liturgical dramas with the later play-cycles, it is evident that the later works show a new concept of drama as an independent form, with its own thematic and structural organization which is not dependent upon a wider setting.

The evolutionary approach to literature necessarily minimizes such basic distinctions, but it also sustains its argument by using critical terminology in a special way. It is generally agreed, for example, that the Resurrection play, the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, is the earliest liturgical drama, and it may be used to indicate the general characteristics of the genre. Its setting is the concrete symbolic focal point of the service, the Easter sepulchre, and its action is simple and processional movement towards that focal point. Its dialogue is a development of a chant appropriate to the service of the day. Yet, to apply terms such as *setting*, *action* and *dialogue* to this play is to use these terms with a meaning somewhat different from that which they have in modern dramatic criticism. The setting contributes much to the meaning of the dialogue and action, but its importance is extra-dramatic; its symbolic significance is independent of the action which focuses upon it and belongs to the wider pattern of church symbolism. The action is only minimally significant and hardly underlines the symbolic significance of the play or the humanity of its participants. The dialogue is a simple exchange of information; it does not involve a revelation and interplay of character and emotion. Both action and dialogue are further limited in scope by the liturgical situation since the stylized chant produces an effect very different from that usually suggested by the term *dialogue*, and the instructions concerning the dress and actions of the actors do not suggest impersonation (there is no suggestion of verisimilitude) but mime. We are aware of three clerics whose role as representatives, rather than representations, of the three Maries is established primarily by the day, the service, and their relationship to the symbolic focal point. More-

over, the action and dialogue are not really fused — the exchange of information interrupts the processional movement and it would easily be possible to divide the play into silent procession and static dialogue.

It could be argued that processional action towards a symbolic focal point and independent moments of chanted dialogue are characteristic of this liturgical form. Hence, in the Resurrection sequence we could see processional action in the visit of the Maries to the tomb, the race of Peter and John to the tomb, and — although this episode is not so common — the journey to Emmaus, while the dialogues would include that between the Maries and the angels or between Christ and Mary Magdalene. In the Nativity sequence, processional action would include the journeys of the Magi and of the shepherds, and the dialogues would include those between Herod and the Magi and the angel and the Magi. It would be untrue to claim that all action was unrepresentational and devoid of dialogue, or that all dialogue could be separated from action and conveyed nothing of the humanity of the speaker — witness the presentation of the angry Herod in certain liturgical plays. But the separation of the elements is far more marked in liturgical plays than in modern drama and, in consequence, the final effect is very different. The separation of the elements of drama is part of the general dependence of these plays upon liturgical actions for their staging and liturgical contexts for their meaning.

It is arguable, then, whether terms such as *play* or *drama* should be applied to these rituals which, like the elements from which they sprang, existed as aids to worship — not to draw interest to themselves but to point the meaning of the day and service. This is liturgy at its most dramatic, but hardly drama. Moreover, its characteristic features could not develop into vernacular cyclical drama, for only a limited number of Biblical episodes combine the elements of symbolic focus, processional action and chanted dialogue. Movement towards a symbolic focal point could hardly comprehend the complex actions of many of the Biblical episodes, even if such a focal point was available within the church, and the chanted dialogue would be a barrier to a rapid emotional interchange, as opposed to a mere exchange of information or leisurely lament. It would thus be difficult to treat episodes such as the Temptation and Fall, the Flood, scenes from the ministry of Christ, the Acts of the Apostles and the Last Judgment without changing the character of liturgical drama. Again, the diversity of the full Passion sequence, from Betrayal to Crucifixion, is far removed from the simple progressions and exchanges of information of the liturgical plays.

Yet if the structure of liturgical plays reduces the possibility of dramatic development, the extant vernacular play-cycles stand in marked contrast. These cycles all dramatize the Passion of Christ, each treating it with a particular emphasis.[14] A thematic focal point holds together the various "plays" within the cycle, as opposed to the liturgical plays where the focus was concrete and symbolic. The cycle-plays which present the three major interventions of God in human history — Creation, Passion, Judgment — have no counterparts in liturgical drama at all. Furthermore, in the cycle-plays both dialogue and action serve a thematic purpose. For example, in the Chester play of Cain and Abel[15] the two characters establish themselves by their speeches and actions. A chain of cause and effect is established, so that the opening dialogue is a preparation for the tithing and God's first

judgment, and this in turn leads to Cain's verbal and physical reaction which constitutes the climax of the play. Here one may speak of dialogue and action in relation to theme, structure and plot. The setting, so important for liturgical drama, is not significant here; the play is intelligible without reference to an extra-dramatic context, for it creates its own standards of evaluation, whereby the dramatic contrast of Cain and Abel is a realization of the contrast of evil and good which is made explicit in God's condemnation of Cain's action. And this incident in turn contributes to the wider structure of the whole cycle.

Consequently, I would welcome a reappraisal of the whole range of medieval drama, for I feel that our critical terminology may lead us to see connexions where none exist. Some historical connexion could certainly exist between the liturgical plays and the later cycles, but I would question whether it is as important as critics have often made it appear. I am far more conscious of the differences between the liturgical plays and the later cycles than of the similarities. The liturgical plays are a by-product of liturgical activity inside the church and are intelligible primarily within a liturgical context. The play-cycles were written to be acted on an open-air stage and can be more readily approached as self-sufficient dramatic forms with their own thematic and structural unity. Each form, cyclical and liturgical, requires its own standards of critical evaluation.

The "Literary" Approach

V. A. Kolve has already proposed an alternative to the traditional theory of evolution from liturgical to cyclical drama. He takes the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi as the *raison d'être* of the cycles, but after examining the episodes dramatized in the extant cycles or listed as dramatized in lost cycles, he concludes that the Old Testament plays pose a problem:

> The Christian story begins with the Fall of Man and ends with Doomsday, termini perfectly adequate in themselves to make sense of the Nativity-Passion-Resurrection story. There is no need for filling.[16]

He explains the dramatization of the Old Testament episodes in terms of two selective principles — the figural significance of events and persons in the episodes, and the importance of the same events and personages in the traditional chronological division of the Ages of the World. Other episodes, apart from these major ones, might be dramatized in particular cycles, but only the major episodes are common to several cycles.

A number of suppositions are involved in this theory, but perhaps the most important is that of the primacy of structure resulting from concentration upon a particular theme:

> These two organizing ideas are, one might say, the beams in the building, largely hidden under decoration and surface detail, but there all the while and of utmost importance. They hold the building together, they give it its shape; and by its shape, we know it.[17]

Yet although only certain episodes are dramatized in the cycles, it does not follow that the selection was made with a particular thematic and structural concern in mind. To appear in a play-cycle, an episode might have to fulfil a number of conditions. There would have to be a guild capable of performing

it and willing to do so. The episode would have to be translated into dramatic terms. And it would then have to be accommodated in the cycle. Since a cycle consists of plays of Biblical events arranged in chronological sequence, it can be studied in chronological and figural terms, but this approach is not necessarily the most useful. Rather, it represents an attempt to project a modern concept of structural unity upon a medieval form which can just as readily be approached from a different standpoint.

Critics of medieval drama could learn much from the discussions of similar problems of theme and structure in Old English poetry, for the events dramatized in the cycles are, in many cases, treated at length or in brief allusions in Old English poems. Thus the Old English poem, *Genesis A*, follows the Biblical narrative in Genesis up to Abraham's sacrifice of a ram instead of his son Isaac, while the Fall of the Angels and the Fall of Man are treated in *Genesis B*, a fully developed and lively narrative work inserted into *Genesis A*.

Exodus combines praise of Moses with the narrative of the crossing of the Red Sea and includes "digressions" on Noah and Abraham. The life of Christ is represented by poetic accounts of the Temptation, the Passion, the Harrowing of Hell and the Last Judgment, and there are other incidental accounts of the Fall and lyric elaborations on Christ's Birth and Passion which stand outside the narrative traditions. *Beowulf* may well be the adaptation of a secular heroic legend to a Christian context, and in that poem there are references to Cain and to the Flood among other Christian allusions. Anglo-Saxon poets, like later cyclical writers, had to select their subjects and often chose the same ones as the dramatists. Indeed, they might also treat events in a dramatic manner, as in the dialogue between Joseph and Mary in *Christ III* concerning Mary's supposed adultery, which has been described as "the earliest dramatic scene in English literature."[18]

It is possible to approach such works from a number of directions. B. F. Huppé emphasizes figural selection and in his discussion of *Genesis A* finds an overall plan, in which the inserted *Genesis B* has a thematic function. This plan develops

> the related concepts of the Fall and the Redemption, as they are prefigured in Genesis, in order to reinforce the basic theme announced at the beginning of the poem — the praise of God.[19]

Huppé continues:

> *Genesis A* stands at the beginning of the great medieval literature that, with the symbolic meaning of the Bible always at the center of consciousness, was to extend the imagination beyond the structural limitations of biblical commentary in such works of culmination as the *Divine Comedy* and *Piers Plowman*.[20]

Such a development would clearly comprehend the play cycles.

Huppé reaches his valuation in figural terms, while recognizing that the poet "is thinking in English terms, making full use of, 're-employing,' the language of his pagan ancestors for Christian purposes with flexibility and subtlety of connotation."[21] Other critics would see the influence of the Old English poetic tradition which, in concept and diction, was well equipped to treat of themes of heroic martial and social import, as a major factor in the

elaboration of scenes of action in terms of traditional battle-description, and of social situations in terms of Germanic social organization. Thus S. B. Greenfield, commenting on Huppé's approach, states:

> The thematic pattern perceived in *Genesis A* seems quite a lucid account of that poem's coherence, but also . . . many of the "spiritual" meanings need no specific exegetical knowledge to fathom, but are rather naturally inherent in the narrative material.[22]

On the other hand, the influence of the vernacular tradition could be minimal. R. B. Burlin, in a recent study of the *Advent Lyrics*, which are outside the narrative tradition, has pointed out that

> though the *Advent* poet's immediate inspiration was liturgical, it would be more accurate to define his metaphoric domain as scriptural. What God expressed at the Incarnation, in terms of actual event, shed light on all other human happenings before and since, on the entire process of history from Creation to Judgment.[23]

Somewhere in between stands a poem such as the *Exodus*. Its editor, E. B. Irving, agrees that its poet knew the service for Holy Sunday which has been suggested as a possible source, but stresses that Scripture is an equally, if not more, probable source for the association in the poem of God's covenants with Noah, Abraham and Moses, and that "we must assume that the poem is in organisation essentially the work of the Anglo-Saxon poet."[24] At the same time, the development in certain sections clearly owes a great deal to the existing heroic narrative tradition.

Hence it may be supposed that, in Old English, an immediate liturgical starting-point might lead to a wider context of scriptural imagery and reference which would be incorporated into the vernacular tradition where compatible. The relative importance of these possible influences would vary, but together they suggested that certain episodes should be selected and developed. The attraction lay in extending the significance of the episodes through the historical network of images and references provided by the Bible and made current by Biblical commentaries, and through the contemporary images and associations provided by vernacular poetry. Although no Old English poem has the "Creation-to-Judgment" structure, the fact that Anglo-Saxon poets, influenced by a variety of considerations, took for their subjects many events later dramatized in the cycles suggests that the cycles should be considered not as a new beginning but rather as the outcome of a long vernacular evolution which began before the *Quem Quaeritis* had developed into liturgical drama and which was not wholly distinct from (or wholly dependent upon) the liturgy. This long interaction of liturgy, scripture and poetic tradition had already made certain episodes more familiar to writers and their audience and made them obvious candidates in a sequence of Biblical subjects for vernacular treatment. In England particularly, a long and thriving religious vernacular tradition may have been a factor in the emergence of the Corpus Christi cycle as a characteristically English form.

If we seek the "Creation-to-Judgment" framework necessary for the cycles, we may find it, as Kolve has done, in the long vernacular Middle English works, such as the *Cursor Mundi*, which are believed to have influenced

the cycles and which depend upon earlier Latin works such as those of Peter Comestor (themselves looking back to a tradition evident in Bede and Orosius, for example). That vernacular works showing a development towards an extended chronological framework appear in Middle English rather than in Old English literature is perhaps explained by two general trends in English vernacular literature after the Norman Conquest. The first trend is towards a wider and more comprehensive chronological perspective. We may compare the treatment of the isolated incident in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in prose, or in the late historical narrative poems of *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon*, with the wider time-scale that appears in vernacular poetry in, for example, Laȝamon's *Brut*, or in the insistence on a well-defined sequence of days, seasons and generations which we find in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, roughly contemporary with the earliest cycles. Time assumes a new importance. The second trend referred to is linked to the first through the chronicle-romances: it is the emergence in secular literature of the long romance narrative.

Middle English religious narrative poems in the vernacular show the influence of a variety of traditions. The predominantly scriptural influence is seen in works such as *Genesis and Exodus*, a work based upon Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica* but covering only certain events in Genesis and Exodus. Its scope, from the Creation to the death of Moses which is briefly related after the episode of the Moabite women, corresponds almost exactly to that of the Chester Old Testament plays without the prophet-sequence. Inevitably, certain key figures appear — some important in the play-cycles, like Noah, Abraham and Moses, and others not important, like Jacob (a minor appearance in the Towneley cycle) and Joseph; the episode of Cain and Abel is undeveloped in the poem. Yet what is most significant is where the poem stops, and why; the poet says that he will tell:

> Quhu lucifer, ðat deuel Dwale,
> . . . .
> And held hem sperd in helles male
> Til god srid him in manliched,
> Dede mankinde bote and red,
> And unspered al ðe fendes sped,
> And halp ðor he sag mikel ned. (20-26)[25]

This might be a statement of the theme of a Corpus Christi cycle, even though the poem does not deal with the life of Christ. It is arguable that the poet's concern with a divine purpose led him to select and develop certain episodes which, explicitly or implicitly, prefigured New Testament events.[26]

If, on the other hand, we examine the *Cursor Mundi*, a work utilizing the temporal framework stressed by Kolve, we find that the poet sees his task in a different way:

> Men ȝernen iestes for to here
> And romaunce rede in dyuerse manere
> Of Alisaunder þe conqueroure
> Of Iulius cesar þe emperoure
> Of greke and troye þe longe strif
> Þere mony mon lost his lif
> Of bruyt þat baron bolde of honde

Furste conqueroure of engelonde
Of kyng Arthour þat was so riche
Was noon in his tyme him liche. (1-10)[27]

This poet saw his work in terms of the literature of entertainment and, like the dramatist, had to popularize his subject-matter and inject into it a greater degree of narrative interest than is characteristic of a purely doctrinal work.[28] This narrative interest, which is a way of holding the attention of an audience accustomed to secular narratives, involves a concern with motivation and cause-and-effect which requires a greater emphasis upon the literal representation of events. Whereas in the poems on Old Testament incidents in Old and Middle English the Passion-sequence may be implied, in poems like the *Cursor Mundi* it duly takes its place in the account of events.

The chronological organization and narrative emphasis are likewise characteristic of the play-cycles and are both aspects of a new literalism which distinguishes the cycles from the liturgical plays. The cycles and the religious narrative poems of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are part of a new zeal for lay instruction; their subjects had been made familiar to lay audiences through their treatment in a long vernacular poetic tradition, but these same subjects were now treated in a new way. As in the *Cursor Mundi*, so in the cycles a wide chronological framework is utilized; the play-audiences knew, as they watched the Old Testament scenes, that the Passion-sequence was only a few wagons away, to be presented vividly before their eyes in due course.

Yet despite these obvious links between the vernacular poems and the cycles, the dramatist's medium is not that of the poet, and treatment of the same subject by dramatist and by poet may produce very different effects. Hence it is finally important to consider whether the chronological-typological framework of long vernacular poems could be used with the same effect in the play-cycles.

The "Dramatic" Approach

A Biblical event may have typological significance and its action-narrative may equally attract a poet working in a narrative tradition and a dramatist seeking a visually realizable plot. But poets may stress other aspects of a subject than the narrative, seeking a compatibility of mode and subject. A dramatist also has to seek a compatibility of mode and subject, and not all Biblical subjects can be dramatized — at least not without considerable modification. The sacrifice of Isaac is given in a few lines in *Genesis and Exodus*,[29] corresponding to three verses in the Biblical account;[30] but in drama the episode is expanded and realized, in visual as well as verbal terms, in a dialogue between Abraham and Isaac which has no parallel in the Bible or in poetry. In the Chester play, this dialogue develops from Isaac's bewildered questions, through his horrified pleading when he learns that his own father is to kill him, to his expressed resignation on hearing that this is God's will, after which the dialogue continues for a further hundred lines as Isaac delays his father by questions.

This dialogue could readily be approached from a didactic standpoint. The sacrifice of Isaac prefigures the sacrifice of Christ. Isaac's ingenuous questions reflect a genuine and Christlike concern for others, corresponding to Christ's own concern, at His Passion, with the fall of Jerusalem, the for-

giveness of His foes, the future well-being of His Mother. The laments of Abraham are a planctus-like counterpoint to the action. Kolve draws attention to Isaac's appeal to Jesus for mercy, a further indication of the link,[31] and the Expositor makes this meaning plain.[32] This is not merely a naturalistic dialogue between father and son; its purpose is primarily thematic and the incident has meaning mainly in relation to the Passion.

Yet the same dialogue is open to other interpretations. Dramatically, the emotion of Isaac is a natural response, the assertion of a natural justice against the unnatural act of a father killing his son, and, as a climax, of a loving father ordered to commit this "sin" by a supposedly loving God. The prolonging of the dialogue suggests that Isaac is deliberately creating questions and trying an emotional appeal, subtly disguised as humble obedience, to weaken Abraham's resolve. The result is a struggle in Abraham between paternal love and duty to God which constitutes an important part of the modern dramatic appeal of the play. It also has the effect of delaying, and hence intensifying, the sacrificial climax to the play.

Are these two interpretations compatible? This is a matter for individual response, but I feel that they point in different directions. Although, allegorically, the Isaac-play is an assertion of the working-out of God's plan at the Crucifixion, naturalistically, the stress on human suffering becomes a critical comment on the same plan. When Abraham says:

> O my sonne, I am sory
> To doe to thie this great anye:
> Gods Comaundment do must I,
> His workes are ay full mylde. (293-96)

the inadequacy of the expression — *I am sory, this great anye* — intensifies the sense of suppressed anguish, while in this context *His workes are ay full mylde* is patently untrue and can hardly be said without bitterness. It is this kind of emphasis which makes tragedy possible in a Christian framework — we lose sight of the wider doctrinal context.

The problem is even greater when the emotional emphasis is linked to a tone markedly out of keeping with the doctrinal significance of the play. Doctrinally, among its possible significations, the Flood could be a prefiguration of the Judgment.[33] Dramatically, it could evoke a picture of human terror, like the account in *Cleanness* where the images of human helplessness and suffering overshadow the idea of divine justice. But the cycles, limited in numbers and space and time, concentrate upon a few figures, Noah and his family. In Towneley, in particular, there is a sustained argument between Noah and his wife which results in physical violence. It is possible to regard Mrs Noah as typifying an antediluvian discord, an image of the sin which God is punishing, and to argue that the play asserts the theme of order at a family level — on board the Ark Mrs. Noah calms down and typifies the restoration of authority which follows the Flood. But the echoes of scenes of domestic strife from the fabliau are strong, and Noah is comically ineffectual in his dealings with his wife, in contrast to his dignified dialogues with God.

The Herod Play also illustrates the discrepancy between doctrinal purpose and naturalistic effect. The Chester Herod, like the Herod of other cycles, is a raging tyrant, relying upon brute force to assert his authority and torn by inner fears and uncertainties. He could be a symbol of the sinful disorder of the pre-Christian world. This disorder is presented at a personal level in

Herod's inner conflicts; at a social level in that his personal disorder results in disorder in his realm, of which the Slaughter of the Innocents is one manifestation — knightly power turned to unchivalric ends. But from a naturalistic standpoint, Herod is the choleric man made comic by his anger, undignified and ineffectual, and the comedy of his presentation becomes the main feature of the play.

There are many other such plays, but the main "problem-play" is surely the Towneley *Secunda Pastorum*. From a purely literary standpoint the success of the play should lie in the balance of comic and serious scenes; but the comic element, particularly the character of Mak, seems to acquire so much weight and importance that it obscures the Nativity section. Doctrinally, a unity can be postulated for the play. It presents a theme of disorder — the chaos of a realm under a disordered ruler (Herod) and characteristic of a sinful world with no redeeming Saviour. The disorder at the top of the social ladder, in Herod and his knights, is manifested also in the misery of the shepherds lower down the scale. At this level, Mak is the agent of disorder, a magician casting a spell on the shepherds to steal their lamb. The forgiveness of Mak is a necessary prelude to the Nativity scene, and the lamb as baby is a thematic reversal of the Christ-child as sacrificial Lamb. So the first part of the play is the thematic reversal and type of the second, important, not only as secular comedy but also as the prefiguration of a central episode, the Nativity. Mak's lamb produces disorder, but the Lamb of God will restore harmony.

Evidently this co-existence of naturalism and doctrine is inseparable from the nature of the Corpus Christi plays themselves. The thematic significance of a play depends upon the relation of the play to the wider context of medieval religious thought, especially in relation to Biblical exegesis, which might be familiar to the audience. Structurally, it depends not upon the individual episode but upon the connexion between the episodes, upon the total framework of the cycle which exists to serve doctrinal ends. By this approach, we are much closer to a modern concept of a play than in the liturgical drama, but the dramatic effect is still secondary. The prophets and the plays of Moses have a secondary importance in cyclical structure, according to Kolve, because they do not have doctrinal centrality in conformity to his twin principles of selection, not because they are incapable of satisfactory dramatic development or presentation (which they are). At best, we respond on two levels — to the immediate emotional impact of the presentation and to its wider analogical significance in the cyclical structure. Structural unity is not necessarily the same as thematic unity, although the attraction of Kolve's approach is that it indicates a means of relating the two, although neither necessarily produces dramatic unity.

To counteract any tendency to regard the cyclical framework as providing an adequate structural and thematic unity, I would emphasize not only the tension between tone and doctrine in, say, the plays of the Flood and of Abraham and Isaac, but also the effect produced by passing from one to the other. Doctrinally, the picture of God's wrath gives way to the picture of God's love, but the dramatic transition is from comedy to tragedy. Such variations in emphasis and tone run throughout the cycles and leave the impression not of a unified structure but rather of a sequence of distinct dramatic episodes, each separately conceived.

This impression is strengthened when we examine the production of the cycles in the Middle Ages. Were the postulated civic registers collections of plays independently commissioned by individual guilds, or were the guild-texts individual copies from a centrally written register? Notes in the York plays suggest that some guilds were performing plays of which no record was officially made,[34] and at Chester, during the revision of 1575, the Smiths submitted two versions of their play for approval.[35] If we believe that revisions of plays were the responsibility of the guilds, it is easy to see how the individual episode could develop at the expense of overall structure. This problem can be exemplified from the manuscript of the Towneley Plays which is clearly a compilation. At some time, it is postulated, this cycle borrowed a number of plays, with minor variations, from the York Cycle,[36] and at another time some six plays, it is claimed, were rewritten by a single author, distinguished by his own stanza-form and dramatic style, and usually called "The Wakefield Master." There are two ways of regarding these theories. Perhaps Wakefield borrowed its cyclical base from York and employed one man to redraft certain plays and modify the total thematic structure. Or perhaps the Wakefield authorities decided to stage a cycle but left the responsibility for texts to the guilds. The poorer guilds took plays from York, but the richer ones could afford to employ their own writer, a man who produced powerful and entertaining work which enhanced the status of the guild that performed it; nor need this last development have taken place when the cycle was originally formed.

Certainly, as towns rose and fell in prosperity, the structure of the cycle changed. The York cycle was modified on a number of occasions because the economic decline in the town had so impoverished some guilds that they could not afford to present their play. For example, in 1419 the Ironmongers complained of the expense of staging *Mary Magdalene* and some time in the 1430's they gave it up. In 1431 the Goldsmiths were unable to produce two plays, so their play of Herod was transferred to the Masons who wished to give up their play of *Fergus*. In 1422 four pageants were combined to give a single play of the Condemnation, and two to give the Crucifixion play. The result of these changes, a result produced by economic and not artistic considerations, is to distort the structure of the cycle and the possible internal unity of the individual episode. The principle of these revisions is evidently to retain the doctrinal framework of the cycle even at the expense of dramatic unity. Chester and York both have plays of the Creation; but the fact that Chester combines Creation and Fall with the story of Cain and Abel, while York devotes six plays to Creation and keeps *Cain and Abel* separate, is bound to affect the dramatic impact of the Creation.

Wagon-staging would necessarily reinforce the episodic nature of the cycles, unlike the modern performances at York and Chester, where the performance on a fixed set by a limited group of actors emphasizes cyclical structure and individual characterization. By mounting each play on a wagon and conceiving each separately, the total cyclical frame is broken. With a different Christ, Herod or Pilate in each episode, characterization in performance was limited to the individual play and there could be no overall consistency in portrayal. Moreover, the analogical structure might well be offset by the immediacy of the performance. It is to be expected that in the civic community the actors were known personally to many, that

despite the emphasis upon production, one performance a year was not likely to produce an acting "style"; and the closeness of actors and audience, particularly when the actors descended to street-level, would intensify the sense of reality. The actors were manifestly ordinary human beings "pretending." This may well have prompted the Wycliffite complaints that the plays were blasphemous.[37] The high cost of production, seen in guild-accounts, no less than the ambitious theatrical effects often required,[38] may have been an attempt to master the problem of maintaining the dignity of high subjects under these difficult conditions. It is possible to regard the wrestling-match of the Chester Shepherds, the "necking-scene" between Pilate and his wife at York, or Pilate's cheating tactics with the torturers at Towneley[39] as manifestations of sinful disorder; but the immediate physical representation suggests a literal event rather than allegory, much as it tends to do in overtly allegorical morality plays where real vice takes over the centre of interest from abstract virtue.

The liturgical plays were written for a limited number of clerics on a fixed set. This method of fixed-set/limited-cast production was used for the morality plays and in France for vernacular religious plays, and it is by far the best method dramatically. The theme of the cycles is likewise better conveyed by the fixed set, which emphasizes dramatic unity. Far more ambitious effects are possible on a stage where complicated scenery and machinery can be erected and where the actors are at a remove from the audience; and also where a character is portrayed by the same actor throughout. And the cost of fixed-set production must have been lower than that for wagon-based drama — fewer actors, fewer costumes, less scenery, and no expense in maintaining a wagon and renting a house to keep it in during the rest of the year. But wagon-staging had one point in its favour — its inclusiveness.

Apparently any guild that wished and could afford it could be involved in play-production. The casts concerned are quite large — the total speaking numbers required for York are about 320, Chester about 270, Towneley about 250,[40] and even the two extant plays from Coventry require 38 characters — and this does not include walk-on parts, like the men who carried the animal-images into the Ark at Chester or the soldiers who capture Christ in Gethsemane or the "extras" who must have been used for crowd-scenes. To these should be added the "behind-the-scenes" staff — those who made the costumes, auditioned the actors, prepared the wagons and pushed them through the streets. This was, from a civic point of view, a great communal event in which many members of the community had a personal stake, and it was therefore like the village folk-play in its social function. A football match rather than a play might be a better modern analogy.

However we regard the cycles, we should be aware of the difficulties in applying to them modern ideas of "play" or "drama." While critics since Chambers may have oversimplified the historical evolution of medieval drama, their studies have suggested that the cycles were the meeting-point of a number of influences, not all of which would be acceptable in a modern concept of drama. The cycles were tied to a particular background of Biblical exegesis, to a certain poetic tradition, to a unique set of social conditions. A reading of any cycle does not support the view that they propounded doctrines totally unacceptable to the post-Reformation Church, particularly in

the uncertain years of the sixteenth century, or that they could not have been "Protestantized" with very little effort; but in people's minds they were very much tied to the ethos of the old Church. At the same time, one has only to look at the new concern with artistic unity that the Renaissance brings into England, the first effects of which are already evident in the work of Chaucer and of the *Gawain*-poet, to see that the play-cycles are built upon a completely different principle of form and cannot readily be approached as literary drama. Moreover, changes in the character of both towns and guilds tended to make the concept of a community drama sponsored by the guilds more difficult to realize. Entertainment by participation develops towards the modern idea of entertainment by spectacle, with the rise of theatres where the audience is passive rather than active and the players are professional actors. The secular stage is less the product of a gradual process of "secularization" than of independent but related changes in the idea of religion, literature and entertainment which were not reconcilable with the Corpus Christi plays.

NOTES

[1] This article is a modified version of a paper read to the Liverpool University Medieval Society in May, 1967, and to the English Language Postgraduate Seminar at Leeds University in February, 1968. My thanks are due to the members of these two groups, and particularly to Professor J. E. Cross of Liverpool and Professor A. C. Cawley of Leeds.

[2] (Oxford, 1903.)

[3] Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1933).

[4] Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1955).

[5] The liturgical background is regularly incorporated into introductory accounts of the medieval drama for students; see, for example, the introduction to R. G. Thomas, *Ten Miracle Plays* (York Medieval Texts, London, 1966).

[6] O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1965).

[7] V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London, 1966).

[8] The need for studies of local conditions in approaching the play-cycles is argued by Arthur Brown, "The Study of English Medieval Drama," in *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of F. P. Magoun, Jr.*, ed. J. B. Bessinger and R. P. Creed (New York and London, 1965), pp. 265-73.

[9] For a full account of the meanings of *drama* and *play*, see *OED*.

[10] *Dialogue* could refer to the form of a literary work in Middle English but not (so far as I am aware) to one feature of a more complex form (e.g. dialogue v. action); see *OED* and *MED*.

[11] Craig, p. 20.

[12] Chambers, II, 69.

[13] This is the traditional picture of "development," although Hardison has rightly stressed that the development is not necessarily a chronological progression from simple to expanded forms (Hardison, Essay I).

[14] An inevitable weakness of studies of the cyclical form is that they minimize the individual emphasis given to the same event in different cycles. The concentration upon grace in *Ludus Coventriae*, upon the fulfilment of divine purpose in *Chester*, upon human foible in *York* and vital sin in *Towneley* produces very different dramatic and doctrinal effects both within the whole cycle and in the individual plays.

[15] I take examples from *Chester* because the cycle is one in which I am particularly interested; it is typical of the medieval cycles in exemplifying certain dramatic features.

[16] Kolve, p. 56.

[17] Kolve, p. 100.

[18] R. K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (rev. ed., London, 1954), p. 133.

[19] B. F. Huppé, *Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry* (New York, 1959), p. 206.

[20] Huppé, p. 209.

[21] Huppé, p. 209.

[22] S. B. Greenfield, *A Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York, 1965; London, 1966), p. 149.

[23] R. B. Burlin, *The Old English Advent: a Typological Commentary* (New Haven and London, 1968), p. 3.

[24] E. B. Irving, Jr., *The Old English Exodus* (New Haven, 1953), p. 16.

[25] *The Middle English Genesis and Exodus*, re-ed. O. Arngart (*Lund Studies in English* 36, Lund, 1968). Line 21 is missing in the manuscript.

[26] Arngart suggests that this opening statement of theme results merely from the fact that "the author was following his source unreflectingly" (p. 9). He sees the major consideration in selecting and developing incidents in the poem as the poetic form: "The poet on the whole followed Comestor quite closely . . . except that . . . he concentrated on the main themes of action and incident that were best adapted for rendering in epic form" (p. 9).

[27] *Cursor Mundi* (*The Cursur o the World*), ed. R. Morris (EETS, London 1874, 1893).

[28] On the "entertainment function" in Latin works comparable with *Cursor Mundi*, see B. Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1960), Chap. I, "The English Public," and particularly p. 20.

[29] Lines 1321-30.

[30] *Genesis*, xxii, 9-11.

[31] Kolve, p. 73.

[32] *The Chester Plays*, ed. H. Deimling and J. Matthews (EETS, London, 1892, 1916); see Play IV, 461-76.

[33] Cf. *Matthew* xxiv, 36-39.

[34] See introduction and notes to the *York Plays*, ed. L. T. Smith (Oxford, 1885).

[35] For a full discussion of the problem, see G. Frank, "Revisions in the English Mystery Plays," *MP*, XV (1917-18), 565-76.

[36] For a discussion of the postulated relationship, see M. C. Lyle, *The Original Identity of the York and Towneley Cycles* (Minneapolis, 1919). Miss Lyle's theory has been questioned; see A. C. Cawley, *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* (Manchester, 1958), p. xxii, n. 2.

[37] See Kolve, Chap. II.

[38] See F. M. Salter, *Mediaeval Drama in Chester* (Toronto, 1955), pp. 54-80.

[39] *The Towneley Plays*, ed. G. England and A. W. Pollard (EETS, London, 1897), Play XXIV.

[40] M. Rose, *The Wakefield Mystery Plays* (London, 1961), pp. 26-30, compares the cast-numbers for *Towneley* and the estimated population of Wakefield in 1377 in the course of his argument for fixed-set production of the Towneley Cycle. It is no part of the present paper to argue the case of "scaffold" versus "pageant" staging but merely to note that a consequence of wagon-staging would be the reinforcement of an already established episodic structure. It may also be noted that further "unnatural breaks" in overall cyclical structure might occur when the cycle was played over a number of days, as at Chester.