

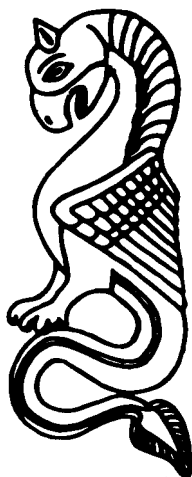
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## KINGSHIP IN THE CHESTER NATIVITY PLAY

By RUTH M. KEANE

(i)

Of the four major English mystery cycles three have extant Nativity plays - York, *Ludus Coventriae* and Chester.<sup>1</sup> Even the most cursory reading of these three plays demonstrates that despite sharing common narrative material, they are totally different in theme and structure.

York XIV, with a cast of only two characters and a narrative concern only with events in Bethlehem, is the most narrowly focused of the three. The nativity is isolated in its context. The play is built on the opposition between worldly concerns embodied in Joseph and trust in God as embodied in Mary.<sup>2</sup> Joseph worries about immediate physical discomfort; Mary believes that her child will save them "fro sorowes sere" (32).<sup>3</sup> Joseph goes in search of light and fuel while Christ, the light of the world, is born and warmed by the animals, protected by God. The play culminates in Mary and Joseph's shared adoration of their "mercyfull maker" (148) to whom they pledge their "seruice" (146, 151).

*Ludus Coventriae* XV, by comparison, is a more extensive and discursive play which includes the journey to Bethlehem and the story of the midwives as well as the nativity. In common with other plays in the cycle the Nativity is firmly Marian in emphasis. Hence the playwright includes two miracles which underline Mary's virginity and the fact that she is the mother of God - the apocryphal story of the cherry tree and that of the withering and subsequent cure of Salome's hand.

Mary initiates a number of actions: she chooses to go to Bethlehem, to see her friends, and she is also the only cyclical Mary who is amused that Joseph should think midwives necessary (cf. ll.180, 181, 190). Joseph, on the other hand, bewails life in general and Octavian's tax in particular. He objects to the fact that he and Mary have to shelter in a stable whereas Mary accepts it.

Her role is strengthened by the reactions of the characters around her. Joseph's incredulity about the painless virgin birth is shared by the midwives, especially Salome, whose withered hand is cured only after she has asked forgiveness both of the child and of Mary. She promises:

In every place I xal telle þis  
 Of a clene mayd þat god is born  
 .....  
 His modyr a mayde as sche was be-forn  
 natt fowle and polutyd as other women be  
 but fayr and fresch as rose on thorn  
 Lely wyte. clene with pure virginyte. (297-8; 301-4)

But it is in Chester that we find the most unexpected extension of the Nativity story, seen characteristically in its inclusion of "Roman" material. Unfortunately critics have, in general, misunderstood the art of the Chester dramatist in his Nativity play, and their condemnation of it arises largely because they have failed to recognise that it differs in kind from both York and *Ludus Coventriae*. Rosemary Woolf believes that the cycle

bears a simple relationship to a few easily identifiable works. This simplicity of method is reflected in the thinness of the imaginative texture of the cycle.<sup>4</sup>

And Stanley Kahrl, writing specifically of nativity plays draws a distinction between York and Chester:

Where the York nativity play is concentrated, economic, and characterised by dialogue consistently appropriate to the action presented, the playwright constructing the Chester Wrights' play has no sense of form. There is no stage in the author's mind for which he is writing.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this article is to begin to demonstrate Chester's unique dramatic principles and themes, especially that of kingship, while recognising that the birth of Christ in play VI is only one element in a complex dramatic structure. Before discussing the play as a whole, I shall assess the role of the principal character in the play, Octavian, Emperor of Rome.

(ii)

Octavian has often been seen as a typical stage tyrant, comparable with Herod, and the Pharoah and Cesar Augustus of the Towneley Cycle. In fact neither set of banns to the Chester plays is entirely consonant with Octavian as he appears in the extant play VI. The early banns refer to him as being "cruell and kene",<sup>6</sup> and the late banns depict him as

Octauyan y<sup>e</sup> Emperowre, y<sup>t</sup> could not well allowe  
 y<sup>e</sup> pphesy of Anchant Sybell y<sup>e</sup> sage.<sup>7</sup>

In effect the banns seem to indicate a tyrannical emperor, in the tradition<sup>8</sup> which is manifested in Towneley IX. But the extant texts of the Chester cycle derive from an alternative tradition<sup>9</sup> in which Octavian is depicted as an exemplary monarch. It is true that

his first speech stresses his "powere" (185), and contains suggestions that the basis of this lies in the possibility open to him of using violence:

kinge, prynce, baron, batchlere -  
I may destroy in great dangere  
through vertue of my degree. (190-2)

But gradually we realise this is not the traditional boast of a tyrant. Octavian's power is not illusory and he has used it to good effect. He has not only extended his kingdom more than any previous emperor (201-3), but, even more importantly, in doing this he has created world peace (237-8).

He is undoubtedly aware of his authority: "All leedes in land bee at my likinge" (225), and he demands "homage and feoaltye" (232) from all. But Chester VI demonstrates that Octavian's claims, unlike those of Cesar Augustus, are based on a realistic assessment of his achievements. His decision to implement a census is one facet of this. Octavian wishes to discover how many people he rules and to give them the means of acknowledging their obedience to him. It can truly be said to "preeve (his) might and (his) postee" (242). Cesar Augustus provides a contrast since he embarks on the census only at the instigation of his advisers, and does so not for Octavian's positive reasons, but to find and kill the child. Similarly Octavian's true authority is demonstrated in his relationship with Preco. Whereas Cesar Augustus threatens his messenger if he fails in his task (103-5), Octavian offers Preco a good horse and promises him a fair lady (277-80, 293-6). Octavian is the initiator of the commands he gives, whereas Augustus both admits his lack of good advisers (37-39) and seems uncertain himself about how to govern.

Preco's departure from the court to implement the census is followed by the entry of two senators who come as representatives of "poore and ryche" (302) to offer Octavian deification. Their stated reasons<sup>10</sup> for this are important as they give substance to Octavian's assertions of his power. The senators maintain that,

. . . soe loved a lord, veramente,  
was never in this cyttye. (303-4)

They base this on three considerations. Firstly Octavian has never wronged his people (307-8), secondly he has brought them peace (309) and thirdly he has protected the people's rights (310). These reasons coincide exactly with Octavian's own claims - that, although he has power to cause suffering, he rules justly; that the people own their property only at his "leave", and that he has created peace (185-208).

Octavian's rejection of deification is equally rationally motivated by an appreciation of his mortality. He knows not only his powers but also his limitations. At the beginning of Octavian's opening speech he announces himself:

I, preeved prince most of powere,  
under heaven highest am I here. (185-6)

"Under heaven" could, of course, merely mean "on earth", and thus be part of Octavian's boast of power. But in view of his later assertions of his mortality it seems reasonable to suppose that he is here acknowledging his worldly supremacy, but under a god. Herod, by contrast, later in the cycle, is the embodiment of a monarch who refuses to allow that his power is limited. He lives in a world of delusion, claiming to be king of all mankind (VIII, 177), yet he

is noe Jewe borne nor of that progenye,  
but a stranger by the Romans made there kinge.  
(VIII, 278-9)

Octavian is the true ruler of the world, Herod merely his underling. Yet even this is not the full extent of Herod's purported powers:

For I am kinge of all mankynde;  
I byd, I beate, I loose, I bynde;  
I maister the moone .....  
.....  
I am the greatest above degree  
that is, or was, or ever shalbe;  
the sonne yt dare not shine on me  
and I byd him goe downe. (VIII, 177-9, 181-4)

The biblical echoes<sup>11</sup> as well as the sheer outrageousness of Herod's claims ironically reinforce the vacuity of his assertions.

Yet Octavian, the true king of the world, is completely aware of his humanity and therefore of his mortality. He elaborates this theme at great length stressing<sup>12</sup> that he must die (319), that he, unlike God, had a beginning and will have an end (329-32), and characterising himself as an old man (327-8). He is, however, prepared to consult the Sibyl to ascertain whether there will ever be a higher earthly king than himself (347-8). Although she later qualifies her answer by relating it to the coming of God's son, the Sibyl's initial answer is "yes" (349) - quite enough to enrage a Cesar Augustus or a Herod. Yet Octavian hears her out, asking only when the reign of the king to come will begin.

Traditionally<sup>13</sup> the Sibyl requests three days to pray before giving her answer and the Chester dramatist utilises this aspect of the legend to place Octavian's vision, rather than Christ's birth at the climax of his play. So it is after the dramatisation of the Nativity that Octavian receives confirmation from the Sibyl that the child in his vision will surpass him (644-50). He willingly accepts this:

Should I bee God? Naye, naye, witterlye!  
Great wronge iwys yt were.

For this childe is more worthy  
then such a thowsande as am I. (661-4)

He subsequently calls the child "prince of postye" (672) and acknowledges himself "his subject" (673). Thus, in his greatest self-abasement Octavian, emperor of the world, achieves the greatest ratification of his authority and power, endorsed by a vision sent from God. Yet although prostrating himself before the child, Octavian loses none of his earthly power. He immediately takes up again his duty to rule, and his last words are those of command to his senators, so that all his citizens will worship the child as he has done.

Thus Octavian's initial regal monologue, his implementation of the census, his relationship with Preco, and his rejection of deification can all be seen as dramatic preparation for the most forcible exhibition of Octavian's true stature as monarch, in his encounter with the Sibyl.

Octavian is thus consistently portrayed in Chester VI more as an exemplary king than as the tyrant which one might expect from the banns. He does not even undergo, as Clopper has suggested, a transition from "boasting tyrant" to "humble suppliant".<sup>14</sup> Rather the tone of his opening speech carries suggestions of what might have been, which the content of his speech belies.<sup>15</sup> This semi-conscious reminder of a typical despot, embodied later in Herod, only underlines the extent of his wisdom and humility.

## (iii)

Chester VI can be conveniently discussed in the four sections demarcated by the direct address of a character to the audience (i.e. by the Nuntius at line 177, by Preco at 373 and by the Expositor at 564). Sections one and three focus on Mary's Judean world; sections two and four (discussed in (ii) above) on Octavian's world in Rome. But the sections are linked thematically especially in their exploration of the nature of kingship.

Mary is at the centre of the action in section one yet she is merely the vehicle of God's plan. In fact she is never praised by any other character in the play except in terms of her role as divine agent. Like the other cyclical Annunciation plays Chester's is based on the Gospel account (Luke i, 26-38), but its opening lines,

Hayle be thow, Marye, mother free,  
full of grace. God is with thee.  
Amongst all women blessed thow bee,  
and the fruite of thy bodye (1-4)

derive from the liturgical "Hail Mary". Thus the Chester Mary is confronted from the outset with a situation demanding greater faith than that asked of the other Marys. She is addressed not only as the chosen of God, but also as the bearer of a child. Her consent

is not invited, only her obedience to the will of God. Luke's gospel initially only indicates that Mary was afraid and wondered what the angel could mean: "Quae cum audisset, turbata est in sermone eius; et cogitabat qualis esset ista salutatio" (v. 29). But the Chester Mary is certain from the outset of her position in relation to God:

Ah, lord that syttes high in see,  
that wondrouslye now mervayles mee -  
a simple mayden of my degree  
bee greete this gratically. (5-8)

She is aware of her lowliness but also completely understands and accepts God's commands. Her "wondering" is that God's plan should be implemented by means of someone so lowly. Indeed Mary's most important characteristic is that she is "poor"<sup>16</sup> both materially and spiritually.

The Christ-child to come, on the other hand, is presented as a figure of majesty and power. Gabriel elaborates on Christ's kingship throughout a whole stanza (17-24). He shall be given David's "see" and reign in Jacob's house "with full might". And it is because of Christ's "endlesse liffe" (an idea significant in relation to Octavian's mortality) that he shall have "such renowne and ryaltye" as no-one has ever had previously. This idea of Christ's royalty is developed in Chester's long recension of the "Magnificat" (65-112). In it he is specifically designated "prince" (81) (the gospel has no source for this in the "Magnificat"), whereas Mary is merely "his feere of meane degree" (76).

This humble self-abasement by the Chester Mary is in sharp contrast to her presentation in the other English cycles. In *Ludus Coventriae* it is her free consent to the will of God that is important:

Whow þe holy gost blyssyd he be  
A-bydyth þin answee and þin assent. (XI, 263-4)

In Towneley X, although Mary's consent is not invited, Gabriel bows to her and addresses her as "godis spouse" (78), queen of virgins (80) and "woman most of mede" (86), so that the emphasis is on her pre-eminence. Even in York, which follows the Vulgate closely in suggesting Mary's acceptance, it is God's will rather than her humble status that is apparent:

I love my lorde with herte dere,  
þe grace þat he has for me layde.  
Goddis handmayden, lo! me here,  
To his wille all redy grayd,  
Be done to me of all manere,  
Thurgh thy worde als þou hast saide. (XII, 187-92)

Mary in Chester, on the other hand, says:

Now syth that God will yt soe bee,  
 and such grace hath sent to mee,  
 blessed evermore bee hee;  
 to please him I am payde. (41-44)

And the play's first section concludes with Joseph's doubts, this scene, too, stressing not Mary's holiness but "Godes will" (164). Joseph, having realised that he is mistaken about Mary's infidelity, does not beg her forgiveness but instead worships God (173-6).<sup>17</sup>

This humble world, miraculously illuminated and elevated by God's favour in the opening section, is further explored in section three, by its incorporation into a universal perspective of nations and politics as Octavian's temporal power reaches into Judea from Rome compelling Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. With this political perspective comes a clearer recognition of a worldly hierarchy which is based on both social rank and on material possession and which therefore stands in contrast to the unseen realm of divine power. The contrast between the two worlds of Rome and Judea is central to an understanding of the play's climax in section four.

Preco opens section three by announcing Octavian's census. Joseph objects but submits to the Emperor's power as he did earlier to the power of God. He is a "citizen" both of the worldly and the divine kingdoms. But his speech stresses his poverty and that of "the poore" (390-414) in comparison with the "castle", "towre" and "manere" of the rich. Mary's vision on the way to Bethlehem (found dramatised only in Chester)<sup>18</sup> extends the audience's concept of rich and poor. She sees two groups of people, one rejoicing, the other in sorrow. And she learns from an angel that the former, the "commen people" (439) are those who will accept Christ. The "morneinge men" (445) are the Jews whose pride will prevent their understanding "that God for man shall light soe lowe" (450).

The idea of Christ's material poverty is stressed in the Nativity just as Mary's was earlier. Mary and Joseph shelter in the stable not just because there was "no room at the inn" and they are poor, but also because "greate lordes of stowte araye / occupye this cyttye" (455-6). Yet even Joseph realises that this is part of God's plan "to make men meeke" (459).<sup>19</sup> Despite the majesty of God, which the opening section of play VI strongly asserted, Christ is born in a stable.

The episode of the midwives, however, re-establishes the paradoxical nature of Christ's kingship by re-affirming the power of God. Tebell greets the child by calling on "dere lord, heaven kinge" (525), but Salome, in doubting Mary's virginity "would tempte Goddes might" (545). The angel in commanding her to ask the child's forgiveness stresses "Godes owne powere, / to bringe mankinde owt of dangere" (554). This is endorsed by the cure of Salome's hand. She asked the child alone for mercy, not Mary and her son as in the *Ludus Coventriae* play. Salome also closes the Nativity scene with an affirmation of her belief in God and in Christ:

Nowe leeve I well and sickerlye  
 that God is commen, man to forbye.  
 And thou, lord, thou art hee. (561-3)



The authority of God and that of Octavian, however, have been counterpointed throughout the play and lie at the heart of its structure. The important word-patterns related to kingly power are applied equally to both. For example, Christ shall reign with "full might" (20), Mary bears him through "Godes might" (31) and God through his "myght gave maystery" (93). Compare Octavian's words: "I am the manfulst man of might" (223). He orders the census to prove his "might" and "postee" (242). The Sibyl prays to "greatest God of might" (368) and Preco delivers the command from Octavian "myche of might" (377). As if to cement the link between Octavian and God, at the moment of Christ's birth Mary uses the very words Octavian used in ordering the census but with reference to the child:

Lord, thanked bee thow, full of might,  
for preeved is thy postee. (503-4)<sup>20</sup>

Paradoxically Octavian and Christ are also linked through their humility. Christ is born in a stable "to make men meeke" (459). In contrast, Octavian the highest authority in the Gentile world, and also Emperor of the Judean world, physically abases himself, offering incense to the child and acknowledging himself "his subject" (673). As Octavian is so well aware, although parallels exist between his position and God's, the crucial difference is that he will die. Octavian's rule is exemplary in the temporal sphere, but it is transitory. God's perfect rule is divine and eternal. This, Octavian demonstrates in his homage to the child in his vision.

Thus in Chester VI the faith and humility which Mary has and which Joseph learns, are also central to the Octavian story. The poor-rich antithesis, which is introduced in the "Magnificat" is developed in the journey to Bethlehem and brought to completion in the contrast between the poverty of the stable and the opulence of Rome. Ultimately Christ's kingship is established as something different from worldly expectations of monarchy, yet is confirmed by the homage not only of the Jewish midwives, but also of the Emperor of Rome.

(iv)

The Chester Nativity play is thus very different from both York and *Ludus Coventriae*. By including such diverse material the Chester playwright set himself the potentially very difficult task of unifying his play. But this, I believe, he has achieved by focusing on the theme of kingship and by counterpointing Judean and Roman scenes, exploring the opposition and parallels between Jewish and Gentile worlds. An understanding of the one is necessary to a full understanding of the other. Octavian's role is thus vital to the dominant themes of Chester VI.

It is in the contrast between Mary and Octavian on the one hand, and Octavian and God on the other that his role emerges. Octavian is a king who (i) uses reason in his understanding of his

mortality, (ii) is open to prophetic revelation, (iii) has his faith confirmed by a vision sent from God and (iv) is the means by which not only peace, but also true religion is established in his kingdom. The dramatist has not just written a simple Nativity play but by incorporating pre-nativity and Roman material has explored the nature of kingship, highlighting the importance of true humility, and affirmed the importance of faith. As the expositor concludes:

Wherby you may take good teene  
that unbeleeffe is a fowle sinne,  
as you have seene within this playe. (720-2)

To this end the Chester dramatist has carefully selected and organised his material.

In this process the role of Mary has been subordinated and her veneration of the child has been largely replaced by that of Octavian. One can only speculate on the reasons for this but perhaps in the light of Clopper's research<sup>21</sup> which would seem to indicate that virtually the whole of Chester in its extant form appears to be of a much later date than has often been acknowledged, the Nativity may have been reworked in order to conform more closely with Reformation theology. The early banns seem to imply that Octavian originally appeared as a tyrannical figure and in them the "cariage (is) of marie myld quene".<sup>22</sup> The later glorification of Octavian effectively removes the emphasis from Mary, while his humility preserves the centrality of Christ's nativity. This presentation of Octavian may also have been politically astute if seen as an indirect praise of monarchical power rightly used.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> York XIV, *Ludus Coventriae* XV, Chester VI. Towneley may well have had a Nativity play, but it is no longer extant.
- <sup>2</sup> For a much fuller account of the York Nativity play see J.W. Robinson, "A Commentary on the York Play of the Birth of Jesus", *JEGP* 70 (1971) pp.241-54.
- <sup>3</sup> Quotations from the cycles will be taken from the following editions: *The York Plays*, ed. L.T. Smith (Oxford 1885; reissued 1963); *Ludus Coventriae*, ed. K.S. Block, EETS, ES 110 (London, 1922; reprinted 1960); *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, EETS, SS 3 (London, 1974); *The Towneley Plays*, ed. George England, EETS, ES 71 (London, 1897). Plays other than those indicated in note 1 above will be designated by roman numerals.
- <sup>4</sup> *English Mystery Plays* (London, 1972) p.306.
- <sup>5</sup> *Traditions of Medieval English Drama* (London, 1974) p.57.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Trial and Flagellation with other studies in the Chester Cycle*, ed. F.M. Salter and W.W. Greg, Malone Society (Oxford, 1935) p.134, 1.126.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.153, ll.167-8.
- <sup>8</sup> See for example Ranulph Higden, *Polychronicon*, ed. Churchill Babington and J.R. Lumby, 9 vols. (London, 1865-86) IV, p.296; and John Lydgate, *The Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, EETS, ES 121-4 (London, 1924-7) Bk. VI, 1-76. For a full discussion of the conflicting traditions concerning Octavian see Ruth M. Keane, *The Theme of Kingship in the Chester Cycle*, M.A. Thesis (University of Liverpool, 1977) Chap. II.
- <sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Mirabilia Romae*, ed. G. Parthey (Berlin, 1869) pp.33-4; and *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Th. Graesse (3rd ed., rep. Osnabrück, 1969) Cap. VI, 44-5. The *Polychronicon* also transmits the Ara Coeli legend with its glorification of Octavian. (ed. cit., IV, 298-300).
- <sup>10</sup> In, for example, *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*, ed. Frances A. Foster, EETS, OS 166 (London, 1926), the *Mirabilia Romae* and the *Polychronicon* deification is offered for different reasons. I have found no analogue where the reasons coincide exactly with those given in Chester.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. Matthew xvi, 18-19.
- <sup>12</sup> There is no similar elaboration of this idea in any of Chester's purported sources such as the *Stanzaic Life*.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for example, the *Mirabilia*.
- <sup>14</sup> L.M. Clopper, *The Structure of the Chester Cycle, Text, Theme and Theatre*, Ph.D. Thesis (Ohio State University, 1969) p.227.
- <sup>15</sup> It is possible that the speech retains traces, e.g. in the French sections, of an earlier tyrannical Octavian, from a previous stage of the cycle's development.

- <sup>16</sup> Cf. Mary's portrayal in Chester IX, e.g. ll.48-9.
- <sup>17</sup> Compare Towneley X, 356-8, York XIII, 294-6, and *Ludus Coventriae* XII, 193-212.
- <sup>18</sup> The vision is derived ultimately from the apocryphal gospels (cf. Book of James xvii 1 and Pseudo Matthew xiii 1), but cf. *Stanzaic Life* 357-92 for a somewhat different interpretation of the happy and sad people.
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. Chester IX, 23.
- <sup>20</sup> Similar word patterns of "postee", "power" and "dignity" can be traced through the play with reference to both Octavian and Christ just as they both possess "blys".
- <sup>21</sup> See e.g. "The History and the Development of the Chester Cycle", *Modern Philology* 75 (1977-8) pp.219-46.
- <sup>22</sup> F.M. Salter and W.W. Greg, *op.cit.*, p.134, l.125.