

SIGN AND TRANSITION: THE PURIFICATION PLAY IN CHESTER

By JOHN J. McGAVIN

It is clear that the individual plays of the Chester cycle were revised and that the work as a whole underwent a change of character throughout its 150-year life-span.¹ The *Purification* play with which this article is concerned will demonstrate, I believe, that critics should reconsider the importance of individual authorship in any discussion of the structural integrity of the text.

Professor L.M. Clopper has given us a fascinating account of the history and development of the Chester cycle insofar as they can be inferred from the extant documents, and it is upon his history that I shall rely in pointing out the context of difficulty in which literary judgements must be made about the *Purification* play. The first problem concerns the association of the "Purification" and "Doctors" episodes in the one play. The latter episode is not specifically mentioned until the Late Banns (1548-61); yet the "Purification" presumably belongs to the oldest layer of the cycle's composition since the smiths with their play, the *Purification*, appear in both the Harley List of guilds (c.1500) and the original Early Banns (1505-21). One cannot say whether or not the Late Banns reference necessarily implies that the "Doctors" episode was absent from the earlier *Purification* play, for in the extant texts the play, with its "Doctors" section, is still entitled the *Purification*. We do know that neither set of Banns actually describes the cycle as we have it, so the presence or absence of a particular episode in the Banns is not a wholly reliable guide to the date of that episode's composition. As Clopper says, "We cannot be absolutely certain, of course, that the Banns ever noted each incident dramatized in any given text . . .".² Professor F. Salter suggested that two hands were responsible for play XI. The first wrote those parts which appear in *rime couée*, that is, the first half of the play and the final speech in which there is a reference back to Simeon; the second wrote the "Doctors" episode, which is composed completely in cross-rhyme.³ One may well reject his proposed cross-rhyme reviser at other points in the cycle, but the metrical distinctness of the two parts of XI is indubitable and might well support a claim to separate authorship.⁴

The critic's second problem is that even if the play were performed regularly with both of its major episodes, one cannot assume that the text was stable from one performance to another. "The frequent consultation with the 'Regenall' and the return to it to copy out parcels suggests . . . that the guilds could not be assured that their text would remain the same from year to year" (Clopper, 242).

The smiths were apparently involved in this process on at least two occasions in the later history of the cycle - in 1556 and 1561. One may add to this textual instability the fact that as late as the last performance of the drama in 1575 two plays, *presumably* on approximately the same area of Christ's life, were offered by the smiths to the Chester Aldermen for them to decide which they preferred (Clopper, 242).

Thirdly, any critic interested in establishing the unity of the play itself, let alone its place within the cycle, must take account of the source of the "Doctors" episode. Rosemary Woolf writes: "The curious feature of the five surviving plays of the doctors is that four of them are closely related, Towneley, Chester and Coventry all being variants of the play first recorded in the York cycle".⁵ For one half of the play, therefore, we cannot claim that total authorial originality for Chester which would argue for a close relationship with other parts of the cycle.

For several major reasons, therefore, an attempt to discover a rationale for the extant shape of the play, and to demonstrate an intelligible role for it in the cycle would seem hazardous. It would indeed be so if the play itself failed to supply us with sufficient evidence to make the enterprise reasonable. In fact, we have good grounds for making the attempt.

At some point in Chester's history the decision was taken to associate the "Doctors" with the "Purification".⁶ The Bible itself must have suggested support for this association, though it is clear that fidelity to the Bible, however much a characteristic of Chester, was not the primary motivation for joining the two episodes. The episodes are linked by a shared locale: though twelve years separate them, both take place in the temple in Jerusalem. The theatrical advantages of the association must therefore have recommended it. The link must also have been supported, though not demanded, by the proximity of the episodes to each other in the Bible. They are recounted in Luke ii.22-51 and only verse forty provides a nominal separation: *Puer autem crescebat, et confortabatur, plenus sapientia; et gratia Dei erat in illo.* The third link is one forged by the author or reviser himself. At the end of the first episode Simeon prophesies: "Manye signes hee shall shewe / in which untrewre shall non trowe" (XI, 183-4). The prophecy that Christ will provide signs is first fulfilled in the second half of play XI, where he shows miraculous knowledge in his debate with the doctors.

As well as these partly biblically-based links there are stylistic and structural parallels between the episodes created by their author or authors. These parallels not only exist within the play but associate it with the wider fabric of the cycle. The most important of them relates to the concentration of both episodes and of the cycle on the signs which God gives to Man.⁷ Critics have seen different principles of unity in Chester. Professor Kathleen Ashley has concentrated on its nominalist presentation of the power of God, which manifests itself, at the most literal level, in the frequent references made throughout the cycle to "postye".⁸ Professor Peter Travis has emphasized the cycle's insistence that the audience should "behold and believe" and has suggested that the

work may have a design based on the structure of the Apostles' Creed.⁹ Both of these views, quite consistent with each other, can be demonstrably supported by the text, despite the certainty that the cycle was continually undergoing different processes of revision until it ceased to be performed.¹⁰ God's power and Man's belief form the warp and weft of the cycle, but sign is the means by which they are woven together. The importance of sign is demonstrable from the text, even to the point of offering a pattern of recurring words - the words "signe" and "tokeninge".¹¹

In brief, the action of the Chester cycle, and in particular of its New Testament sections, repeatedly centres on signs which display, among other things, Christ's identity as God's Son and his intentions for Man. In the Ministry plays the signs are generally provided by the direct actions of Christ, for example, the healing of the blind man; the miraculous demonstration of the Pharisees' sins when he saves the woman taken in adultery; and the raising of Lazarus. In the Nativity plays signs of the Nativity and its meaning can take a more iconographic form, such as is seen in the Nativity star. Even if the miraculous action is centred on Christ, as it is in the healing of Salome's withered hand (VI, 548-63), sign also frequently involves an angelic intermediary in these plays. After the Resurrection a variety of different actions and visual stimuli operate as signs to the disciples. They provide evidence of Christ's identity; of his bodily resurrection; of his power; of the meaning of his sacrifice; and, ultimately of the justice of his judgement of good and evil. Examples of these signs are his eating and drinking, his Ascension and his wounds. This sign action is summarized to a certain extent at the end of the *Ascension*:

PHILIPPUS

For knowe we mone by sygne vereye
that hee ys Godes sonne, sooth to saye.
Therefore yt ys good we goe to praye
as he commanded here.

JOHANNES

Nowe mon we leeve yt no leeinge,
for both by syght and handlinge,
speakinge, eatinge and drinkinge
hee proves his deitee.

JACOBUS MAJOR

Yea, also by his uppsteyinge
hee seemes fully heaven-kinge.
Whoe hasse therin full leevinge,
saved liffe and soule ys hee. (XX, 173-84)

Events or objects not directly relatable to God's power can also have a signifying role in bearing witness to that power and to the truth of other points of faith. The church of the *Ara Caeli* is described by the Expositor as a "verey sygne" (VI, 700) because it confirms the truth of the Nativity star's appearance to Octavianus. It is a sign available to the medieval onlooker of the truth of the Virgin

Birth, itself in turn a miraculous sign of Christ's divine nature. Similarly, in the play now under discussion, the candle which Joseph offers to Simeon is also described as a "signe" because it too bears witness to the Virgin Birth:

JOSEPHE

A signe I offer here alsoe
of virgin waxe, as other moo,
in tokeninge shee hase lived oo
in full devotion.
And, syr Simeon, leeve well this:
as cleane as this waxe nowe is,
as cleane is my wife, iwys,
of all corruption. (XI, 143-50)

This sign is not itself miraculous, as is the healing of Caecus, or indeed the Nativity star - we could describe it as a symbol perhaps - yet insofar as its function is to display Christ's identity through confirmation of the Virgin Birth it is not different essentially from the miraculous signs already given to Simeon earlier in the play. There the miraculous appearances of the word "virgin" on the two occasions when Simeon had substituted "good woman" became signs to him of the truth of the Virgin Birth. In the second half of the play the action again centres on signs when the child Christ displays his divinity through his miraculous knowledge of the laws and hence reveals himself as the future Saviour. Whether or not this play involves the work of more than one author its interest in sign is both internally uniting and externally consistent with the rest of the cycle.

Each of the two halves of play XI also illustrates Chester's frequent juxtaposition of contrasted attitudes to the signs offered. Though the precise form of a character's acceptance or rejection of sign varies according to the particular stage reached in Man's history, the underlying contrast of the spiritually alert and the spiritually degraded recurs. Some, the woman taken in adultery, for example, recognize God through the signs he gives; others, like Annas, see the signs only as the product of "sorcerye"; some, previously maimed in body or spirit (Caecus and the Shepherds suggest themselves) achieve health through the effect of the signs upon them; others, like Herod and Satan see in them only divine provocation and understand them only as portents of their own downfall.¹² Often contrasts of spiritual response, frequently generated by signs, are expressed in successive speeches.¹³ Examples of this include the two midwives (VI, 525-36), the two thieves (XVIA, 305-20), Centurio and Cayphas (XVIA, 360-71), Lucas and Cleophas (XIX, 21-8), and Peter and Thomas (XIX, 232-9). On one occasion character consistency is set aside to ensure the contrast: in play XIII, 135-8 Secundus Pharaseus is initially shown to be sympathetic to Christ, in order to contrast him with Primus Pharaseus; later he changes back to a more conventional rejection of Christ. In play XI such contrasts are presented in both parts, firstly between Simeon, who apparently cannot believe in a power by which miraculous signs are created, and Anna who can:

SIMEON

Dame Anne, thou may se well here
 this is amended in good manere;
 for a wonder thinge yt weare
 to fall by any waye.
 Therefore, as yt was amisse,
 I have written that soother ys:
 that "a good woman" shall iwys
 conceive, and not a maye.

ANNA

Syr, marvayle yoe nothings thereon;
 forsooth God will take kynd in man.
 Through his godhead ordayne hee can
 a mayd a child to beare.
 For to that high comly kinge
 impossible is nothings.
 Therefore I leeve yt no leasinge,
 but sooth all that is here. (XI, 64-79)

In the second half, Tertius Doctor fears the deleterious effect which Christ's signs will have on his own authority, while Primus Doctor reacts with commendable admiration for the child's knowledge:

TERTIUS DOCTOR

Lett him wend forth on his wayes;
 for and he dwell, withouten dread,
 the people full sonne will him prayse
 well more then wee, for all our deede.

PRIMUS DOCTOR

This is nothings to my entent;
 such speach to spend I read we spare.
 And wyde in world as I have went,
 yett found I never so farrelly fare. (XI, 259-66)

Once it is accepted that play XI is not internally fragmented nor isolated from the cycle as a whole, it becomes a little easier to entertain the possibility that it has a definite function within the developing New Testament plays. I have tried to establish some kind of internal unity in the play, but I certainly do not wish to suggest that its two halves are identical in character. It is more important that we should recognize the variety in the play, together with its unity, for it is this special blend of variety and unity which helps to provide the transition between the Nativity and Ministry sections of the cycle. With this variety the audience can be carried more easily from the Nativity period of Christ's life to the Ministry period; without the unity within the play these two periods would remain distinct and the audience would be thrust abruptly from the earlier to the later. Accordingly, I would like to examine the transitional nature of the play, beginning with a characteristic shared by the two halves and proceeding to the essential change which takes place between them.

The "Purification" and the "Doctors" share a quality which makes them suitable for transitional purposes, particularly if joined in one play. Each has an ambivalent relationship to its nearest context in the life of Christ. By this I mean that each is suggestive of that context but distinguishable from it. This ambivalence is inherent in the episodes' biblical position but accentuated in the drama.

Chronologically the "Purification" is an extension of the Nativity action. Chester envisages it as happening after the traditional forty days from the birth, at which time Christ is obviously still an infant; in Luke it follows almost immediately upon the story of the Shepherds. But Chester also emphasizes the association of the Purification with the Nativity by structural parallels. As with the stories of the Shepherds and the Magi, the story of Simeon begins in spiritual need and ends in the Adoration of the Child. In all three, signs precede the child's epiphany: the Nativity star for the Shepherds and Magi, the miracle of the writing for Simeon. In all three, Joseph verbally confirms the Virgin Birth, which is the central Nativity sign of Christ's Godhead. Additional support is given to this by his obviously aged appearance in the earlier plays and by his offering of the symbolic candle in play XI. Through him, then, the central sign is mediated. In all three stories, men who have received signs are not immediate in their full spiritual response to them. The Shepherds are limited by ignorance; the Magi hesitate in case the Nativity star is "some fantasye" (VIII, 85); and Simeon feels the need to prove the truth of the first sign he receives by again expunging the word "virgin" from his text: "Naye, faye, after I will assaye / whether this miracle be verey" (XI, 60-1). In the Simeon scenes, as in the Nativity plays earlier, an angelic intermediary between God and Man is present and, as here, the angel is often associated with the signs offered to men. In play XI the angel is directly responsible for the miraculous changes in the writing.¹⁴

It is clear that each of the nativity-sequence plays has its individual character and function, and the parallels noted above should not obscure the many differences between them. There are basic similarities, however, which for the onlooker would surely associate the "Purification" with the earlier material. Where this episode parts company with the Nativity is in its location and in the "direction" of its action. Although it reaches its climax in an adoration like the others, this adoration takes place in the temple, not a stable; and the child has come to its adorer. Simeon has not travelled in search of Christ like the Shepherds or Magi. These changes are sufficiently fundamental to the action to modify the association of the episode with the Nativity plays.

The "Doctors" episode has a similarly ambivalent relationship with the Ministry plays.¹⁵ Like them it shows a powerful Christ directly giving signs to men of his identity and nature. It also shows the first of many confrontations in the Ministry between Christ and mocking opponents who fear loss of public acclaim. But what gives the action its point also removes the section from too close an association with the Ministry: Christ, however powerful, is a child, not the adult of the Ministry. His knowledge is that much

more miraculous. Also, however much Mary regards Christ's sayings as commands to be obeyed, Christ's relationship is with his parents and not yet with disciples.

We are carried easily from the Nativity into the Ministry because the first half of play XI is partially retrospective and the second half partially anticipatory.¹⁶ The essential internal development which provides the basis of the transition, however, is the change in the kind of signs offered. The signs which Simeon receives both in the miraculous writing and in Joseph's candle are directed first towards confirming the Virgin Birth. Rosemary Woolf notes that the interpretation chosen for the candle, quoted earlier, was less common than its interpretation as a symbol of light given to the Gentiles.¹⁷ The author has apparently decided to retain the interpretation in the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, from which he also took the story of the miraculous writing (though not all of its details);¹⁸ this enabled him to add to the number of signs bearing upon the central sign. In the "Doctors" episode, however, Godhead is seen not through intermediary signs but in Christ's very action of giving signs himself. Accordingly, the angel who was an intermediary conveyor of signs in the first half has no such place in the second half nor indeed at any later point in the Ministry. Through the transformation in the kind of sign presented in this one play the audience is brought out of a Nativity-dominated experience and is prepared for the kind of action recurrent in the Ministry. One other small but important fact supports this reading of the play and it has the added interest of showing in the author of the Simeon episode a consciousness of that theme of sign which I have claimed is fundamental to Chester. If the author of the "Doctors" scene was a different man this fact may also show his consciousness of the theme and demonstrate his sensitivity to the needs of the cycle.

I have already stated that a major link between the two sections of the play is provided by the fulfilment in the later scene of the earlier prophecy made by Simeon. That prophecy bears quoting: it is probably to be considered as a version favourable to the cycle's interests rather than a wholly accurate translation of the Vulgate text.

SIMEON

And Marye, mother, to thee I saye:
thy sonne that I have seene todaye
is comen - I tell thee in good faye -
for fallinge of many fonne;
and to releve in good araye
manye a man, as hee well maye,
in Israell or hee wend awaye
that shall leeve him upon.
Manye signes hee shall shewe
in which untrewre shall non trowe. (XI, 175-84)

The Vulgate reads: *Et benedixit illis Simeon, et dixit ad Mariam, matrem eius: Ecce positus est hic in ruinam, et in resurrectionem multorum in Israel, et in signum, cui contradicetur.* According to the Latin, Christ himself is the sign which shall be spoken against.

The Authorized Version agrees with the Vulgate in this respect: "And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;" (Luke, ii, 34). Although on one occasion he uses the gerund form "fallinge", the Chester author consistently translates the passage by verbal rather than nominal constructions: Christ has come to Earth "to releeve in good araye"; "many signes hee shall shewe". Certainly our author may have been prompted to this by a desire for clarity but it was not just clarity which led him to translate "in signum" by line 183 rather than by using a nominal construction. For two reasons it would have been quite unsuitable at this stage to present Christ himself as a sign. Firstly, signs of Christ's nature and identity have now given way to his real epiphanal presence, as they eventually did in both Shepherds and Magi stories. Nativity signs have been left behind, and to describe Christ as a sign would be quite contrary to the author's intention of showing epiphany succeeding sign. Secondly, we have seen that the transitional nature of the play depends partly on the change in the kind of signs presented within it. This prophecy directs the minds of the hearers to the kind of sign which is now to characterize the play and the Ministry section of the cycle which follows it. Signs are to be the directly performed miraculous deeds of Christ. The translation thus shows an awareness of the importance of signs and of the way they have been and will be used in the cycle. The author or reviser responsible for the inclusion of the "Doctors" episode may have had the theme of signs in general and the prophecy in particular very much in mind.

Since part of this study's concern is to show the intelligible relationship of this play with the rest of the cycle, it is perhaps worth mentioning that the nexus of prophecy and sign seen in play XI is recurrent in Chester. Signs frequently mark the fulfilment by the first and second persons of the Trinity of prophecies inspired by the third person.¹⁹ Frequently, as in this play, the prophecies are given at a time very close to their fulfilment. We see this, for example, in the Huntington manuscript's account of past Nativity prophecies as it is given by Herod's Doctor. Present at the reading are the Magi, who are the palpable fulfilment of one of the prophecies, as Herod's Doctor tactlessly points out to him (VIII, 318-24). (The Magi thus constitute a sign for Herod.) It is also seen in the prophecies of redemption recapitulated by the souls in the *Harrowing of Hell* (XVII, 25-88 and 185-92). If two hands are responsible for play XI, then we cannot but admire the skill with which the association of the two sections was stylistically blended into the rest of the cycle. The nexus of prophecy and sign is important also because it is precisely the target of Simeon's unbelief in the first scene of the play. The final section of this article will deal with this part of the play, both because it has attracted criticism and because a more sympathetic attitude to it may help us to realize the particular contribution which the play makes to the spiritual experience of the onlooker or reader. Not only does the play link different sections of Christian history, but it also provides a spiritual preparation for the succeeding portion of Chester.

Rosemary Woolf, though she praises later parts of play XI, is not attracted to the opening scene:

In the Chester cycle the attention is also upon Symeon but not in so illuminating a way. The author is here once again following the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, and this accounts for the play's most startling and disconcerting features, namely the long episode of Symeon's twofold and ineffectual attempt to expunge the word 'virgin' from Isaiah's prophecy and to replace it by 'good woman'. This story . . . is ultimately of unknown origin: it is not found in any of the usual sources of the *Stanzaic Life*. It is certainly an infelicitous invention since it destroys the dignity of Symeon and the Chester author was unwise to adopt it.²⁰

I hope that I have said enough about signs to justify, in terms of the cycle, the presence of miraculous material which we might otherwise find rather gratuitous. But it is also possible to defend the play against the charge that Simeon is badly presented. The Chester author takes great care to avoid destroying the dignity of Simeon, though at the same time he wishes to show the potential seriousness of Simeon's doubt.

Simeon's disbelief is directed against the main Nativity sign of Christ's Godhead. Like Salome earlier, he cannot believe that a virgin could bear a child. In rejecting this major sign Simeon is also *by implication* denying to God the absolute power which creates signs and which the nominalistic Chester continually stresses as a characteristic of divinity. An attack is thus also being made upon the terms of the prophecy, and prophecy has high spiritual value in Chester since, as the cycle makes clear, it is a power derived from inspiration by God. Simeon's disbelief is therefore essentially an attack upon prophetic truth, upon God's power as manifested in sign, and upon the special relationship which exists between them, since the latter fulfils the former. When we state his error baldly like this, Simeon appears not so much lacking in dignity as potentially disruptive of the spiritual fabric of history. But his disbelief, though forcefully expressed, is not simply presented. The author certainly wants us to be aware of the nature of the doubt, of its deep spiritual implications, but he wishes on this occasion to preserve the doubter from the considerable spiritual limitation which such doubt would indicate. The reason for this balanced view is that the author wishes to present in each half of play XI the process of change from doubt to belief. This process is a valuable preparation for the Ministry plays in which the groups of believers and unbelievers are more rigidly separated - a separation which is for the audience ultimately propaedeutic to the Last Judgement. The audience sees in Simeon's change of mind and in that of the doctors, the possibility of turning from spiritual inadequacy to illumination.²¹ To realize that there is a possibility of spiritual development between these contrary states gives the audience a perspective in which to judge the actions of men and women who meet Christ, some of whom crucify him. Simeon's character requires additionally careful treatment,

however, because he is not only a doubter who changes to full belief but a doubter who proceeds to validate and confirm the truth of what he previously doubted. As we saw earlier, he repeats the erasure of "virgin" in order to test whether the sign he has received is a "verey signe". In fact the dignity of Simeon is enhanced, not diminished, by his initiating the probative action which confirms the Virgin Birth. The author manages to separate Simeon from the implications of his doubt by several methods.

Firstly, although he rejects the idea of a virgin giving birth, Simeon *does* respect the basic tenor of the prophecies which promise the arrival of Christ:

SIMEON

tyll Godes Sonne come, the sooth to say,
to ransome his folke, in better araye
to blisse come never wee.

That Christe shall come well I wott . . . (XI, 14-7)

Secondly, though by implication he is denying power to God in rejecting the miracle of the Virgin Birth, he does not openly deny God's power. Instead, he marvels at it in the very same speech as his rejection:

A, lord, mich is thy power;
a wonder I fynd written here.
It sayth a mayden clean and cleare
shall conceive and beare
a sonne called Emanuell. (XI, 25-9)

Thirdly, there is in this stanza and the next the suggestion that his opposition is not primarily directed towards God or Isaiah but towards the transcriber of his text. Surely this is the meaning of his concentration on what is actually written.

it is wronge written, as have I heale,
or elles wonder yt were.

He that wrote this was a fonne
to writte "a virgin" hereupon
that should conceive without helpe of man;
this writinge mervayles me. (XI, 31-6)

He does not say that Isaiah was a fool but that the person who wrote what is before him was a fool. This also makes his erasing the text a much more likely act. It is the correction of a faulty text, not a direct attack upon the sacred word. Fourthly, the repetition of the miracle does not bring home to Simeon any sense of error. He is not presented in a penitential way; rather the final proof given him of the Virgin Birth inspires a prayer in which he seeks the additional grace of seeing the future Saviour, a prayer which is, of course, granted. Finally, we may well feel that Simeon's testing (60-1) and

hence proving of this major sign informs the author's happy treatment of his meeting with the Virgin herself, who addresses him as "Ryghtwise Simeon".

Ryghtwise Simeon, God thee see!
 Here am I common here to thee
 purified for to be
 with myld harte and meeke.
 Receave my sonne nowe at mee
 and to my offringe bryddes three,
 as falles, syr, for your degree
 and for your office eke. (XI, 135-42)

The potentially serious nature of the doubt and the fact that the author wishes to contrast Simeon's doubt with Anna's belief must be understood in the context of the author's generally sympathetic treatment of Simeon. With his double function as doubter changed to belief by sign, and as validator of the truth of sign, Simeon has a special place in the cycle, and himself becomes proof to the audience of the Incarnation. We can believe with greater assurance because, from a position of doubt, he has reached full belief.²² The doubter of sign who changes to belief takes on, himself, the evidential force of sign. This is the point of the Angel's reference to him at the end of the play:

Now have you hard, all in this place,
 that Christ is comen through his grace -
 as holye Esau prophecied hase -
 and Symeon hase him seene.
 Leeve you well this, lordes of might . . .
 (XI, 327-31)

It is not, and could not be, the intention of this article to claim that play XI is the work of one man. The two halves are metrically distinct, and while the first shows an individual choice of source, the second reveals a degree of dependence upon the material of another cycle.²³ The first describes its signs as "signs" and "tokenings", but the second, while still presenting a sign-centred action, does not make sign explicit in this way. In addition, some of the links and parallels between the two halves are inherent in the biblical source and do not necessarily indicate that one man was responsible for the writing of both parts. It is possible also, even if the play did originally contain both episodes, that metrical and substantive revision has occurred in each. And yet it surely cannot be denied that the links and the parallels are there; that signs permeate the play, and indeed the cycle as a whole; that the parallels are not wholly derived from the Bible; and that the play can be shown to have a structural integrity and an intelligible role within the Chester cycle. Also, even if our present play XI was not the only possible play for the smiths to perform, it cannot be disputed that it is good for the cycle, in its own right. What can our conclusion be? If we knew the precise history of the play we could be precise in our conclusions. As it is, the weight of the evidence

suggests a fairly complex history of revision. Surely, then, we can claim for the play some sensitive revisers and a process of revision which was essentially normative, which added or changed the material in the light of the cycle's general themes and style. In this way we can cross the gulf between the evident unity of the work and its clearly discontinuous composition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am glad to acknowledge the most helpful discussion which I have had with Dr R.D.S. Jack of Edinburgh University and Professor P. Travis of Dartmouth College. All quotations from the cycle, which will be cited by play and line numbers, are from the edition of R.M. Lumiansky and D. Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series 3 (Oxford, 1974).

NOTES

- ¹ This fact emerges clearly in Professor Salter's studies: F.M. Salter, "The Banns of the Chester Plays", *Review of English Studies*, 15 (1939), 432-57; 16 (1940), 1-17, 137-48. The problems are however more convincingly presented in L.M. Clopper, "The History and Development of the Chester Cycle", *Modern Philology*, 75 (1978), 219-46.
- ² Clopper, "History", 241.
- ³ Salter, "Banns", *RES*, 15, 452.
- ⁴ Clopper indicates weaknesses in Salter's argument, "History", 223-4, note 16.
- ⁵ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London, 1972), p.212. I am grateful to A.D. Mills who kindly showed me the extent of the textual corruption in this episode. My critical treatment of the play as it has come down to us is not, I believe, significantly affected by the corruption.
- ⁶ The weavers' pageant in the Coventry cycle is the only other extant example of this link.
- ⁷ I have studied this aspect of Chester more thoroughly in my doctoral thesis: *Sign and Related Didactic Techniques in the Chester Cycle of Mystery Plays*. This article is specifically concerned with the place of play XI in the cycle. Material relevant to the larger study of signs as they were understood in the Middle Ages and, in particular, as they related to the status of religious art and imagery may be found in: R.A. Markus, "St. Augustine on Signs", *Phronesis*, II (1957), 60-83; Theresa A. Coletti, *Spirituality and Devotional Images: The Staging of the Hegge Cycle*, unpub. Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Rochester, 1975; Leslie Barnard, "The Theology of Images", in *Iconoclasm*, Papers given at the 9th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, March 1975, (Centre for Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, 1977), 7-13; Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-up in Fifteenth Century Devotional Painting*, *Acta Academiae Aboensis*, Ser. A, 31:2 (Abo. 1965); W.R. Jones, "Lollards and Images: The Defense of Religious Art in Later Medieval England" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34 (1973), 27-50; John Phillips, *The Reformation of Images: Destruction of Art in England, 1535-1660* (Berkeley, 1973); Marcia L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language. A study in the medieval theory of knowledge* (London, 1968). The bibliography in Coletti's work should be consulted by any scholar interested in this area of study.
- ⁸ Kathleen M. Ashley, "Divine Power in Chester Cycle and Late Medieval Thought", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 39 (1978) no.3, 387-404.
- ⁹ Peter W. Travis, "The Credal Design of the Chester Cycle", *Modern Philology*, 73 (1976), 229-43.

- 10 Clopper, "History", 242-4.
- 11 These words are less frequent than "postye" and have a wider range of referents, but for these very reasons well characterize different parts of the cycle.
- 12 One could contrast in a general way the Janitor and the citizens of Jerusalem (XIV, 173-200) with Cayphas and the Pharisees (329-48), or the Magi with Herod, or indeed Antichrist's parody of signs with Christ's true signs, but there are many subtle variations on the theme.
- 13 The mere use of such contrasts throughout Chester does not of itself argue a single author or particularly sensitive revisers. It is found notably also in the opening of *Passion Play I* of the *Ludus Coventriae*. One cannot, however, fail to notice how characteristic of Chester such contrasts are.
- 14 It should be said that the "Purification" also shares with the Nativity plays the tendency to direct the mind beyond the nativity action to the Passion, the act which gives final meaning to Christ's coming. The "Purification", by focussing the opening signs given to Simeon upon the altar, imparts a eucharistic quality to the action in keeping with the frequent references forward in the other Nativity material. This particular focus is not present in the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, from which the episode was taken.
- 15 Rosemary Woolf writes of the transitional nature of the various Doctors episodes in *English Mystery Plays*, p.212. Woolf sees the episode as inherently transitional between Nativity and Ministry. I feel that in Chester transition depends upon the joining of the "Doctors" with the "Purification".
- 16 This stylistic retrospection and anticipation is not to be confused with the theological retrospection and anticipation which V.A. Kolve found in the cycles. See, for example, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, (London, 1966) p.59: "The central Advent is never celebrated without reference both ways in time, to the first coming and the last".
- 17 Woolf, *English Mystery Plays*, p.199 and notes 51 and 52, p.390.
- 18 The placing of the book on the altar is not found in *SLC*; nor is the change from red to gold lettering.
- 19 The nativity star is a good example of this. It was prophesied by Isaiah "to whom the spirit of prophecye / was singularly given through the Holy Ghost" (VIII, 318-9). It is itself envisaged as created by Christ - "Hayle, the maker of the stare" (VII, 567). And it marks the fulfilment of the Nativity prophecies.
- 20 Woolf, *English Mystery Plays*, p.199.
- 21 The first Doctor changes his attitude between line 246 and line 263 in response to Christ's claim to divine power, and the third Doctor changes between line 262 and line 299 in response to Christ's continued teaching.
- 22 This is the function that Thomas has finally in play 38 of *Ludus Coventriae*. Chester is subtler in arriving at its conclusion.

²³ Whereas this material is shared with York and other cycles, it is still stylistically at one with Chester. It is spare; dramatizing, in the briefest way, key rejections and acceptances of Christ, contrasted opposing views, and those changes in attitude that have been described. This focussed presentation is typical of Chester. An analysis of the relationship between Chester and other versions would have made this article unwieldy, but the discussion of style in this article surely makes it hard to accept Hardin Craig's view that "It is an imperfect version, just such as would have resulted from oral transmission". Hardin Craig, ed., *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, EETS, ES 87 (1902) 2nd ed. 1957 (for 1952), pp.xxxiii-iv.