

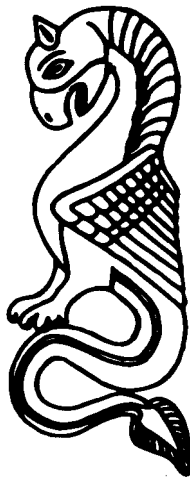
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**"IN THIS STORYE CONSISTETHE OURE CHEFE FAITHE": THE  
PROBLEMS OF CHESTER'S PLAY(S)  
OF THE PASSION**

By DAVID MILLS

This essay addresses an old and much debated problem in the textual scholarship of the Chester Mystery Cycle: why does the latest cyclic manuscript - BL Harley 2124 of 1607 (hereafter H) - present the events from Christ's appearance before the High Priests to the deposition and burial of His body after crucifixion as a single play, whereas the Group - comprising the four earlier cyclic manuscripts of Huntington 2 (1591, Hm), BL Additional 10305 (1592, A), BL Harley 2013 (1600, R), and Bodley 175 (1604, B) - divides them into the two plays of *The Trial and Flagellation of Christ* and *The Crucifixion*?<sup>1</sup> In reopening the discussion, however, I wish to adopt an approach that is somewhat different from that of eminent textual critics such as Hermann Deimling, W.W. Greg and F.M. Salter.<sup>2</sup> They were primarily concerned with the evolution of the Chester Cycle and hence with the historical priority of the 'one-play' and 'two-play' divisions. I wish to consider the description of the play(s) in the Banns and its connection with, and possible influence upon, the extant text. In particular, I wish to examine the kind of editorial decisions taken in 1607 by James Miller, the principal scribe of H, when he copied the play.<sup>3</sup>

*The Banns*

Two versions of the Banns - the public announcement of the Cycle's performance - are extant. The Early, or Pre-Reformation, Banns date from 1540 or earlier and were copied from *The White Book of the Pentice*, a record of civic affairs begun in 1539-40. They survive because the Chester antiquarian Randle Holme III incorporated them in a collection of material, but in a form which he had 'corrected'. These Early Banns were evidently not physically associated with the common exemplar which underlies the extant cyclic manuscripts. Certainly, no cycle-scribe copied them.

The second version of the Banns, known as the Late, or Post-Reformation, Banns, is extant in four manuscripts. Two are in versions of the *Breviary of Chester History*, compiled in and after 1609 by David Rogers from the antiquarian notes of his father, Archdeacon Robert Rogers of Chester Cathedral, who had died in 1595. The other two copies preface the cycle text in MSS R and B, although the version in B lacks the opening 69 lines and the closing 18 lines. It therefore seems probable that these Late Banns were physically associated with the common exemplar, and that the scribes of Hm, A, and H simply chose not to copy them.<sup>4</sup>

The Early Banns unambiguously describe a 'two-play' division of the Passion-material:

Flechters, Bowyers, with gret honors  
the Cowpers find the tormentors  
that bobbyde God with gret horrors  
as he sat in his chere.

The Yronmongers find a caryage good;  
how Jesu dyed on the rode  
and shed for us his precyus blud -  
the find it in fere. (100-7)

Such an arrangement of the material corresponds to that set out in the earliest extant reference to a cycle at Chester. An agreement of 1422 states that the Fletchers, Bowyers, Stringers, Coopers and Turners are to continue to be responsible for their assigned play of *The Flagellation*, and the Ironmongers for their assigned play of *The Crucifixion*. This is the arrangement suggested by the Group MSS.

The Late Banns, equally unambiguously, describe a single Passion-play:

Yow Fletchares, Boyeres, Cowpers, Stringers, and  
Irnemongers,  
see soberlye ye make oute Cristes dolefull deathe:  
his scourginge, his whippinge, his bludshede and passion,  
and all the paynes he suffred till the laste of his  
breathe.  
Lordinges, in this storye consistethe oure chefe faithe.  
The ignorance wherein hath us manye yeares soe blinded,  
as though now all see the pathe playne,  
yet the moste parte cannot finde it. (138-45)

The description therefore confirms James Miller's 'one-play' arrangement of material in MS H.

The Early Banns - perhaps composed in 1521-2 for a change in the date of performance from Corpus Christi to Whitsun - are little more than a reassuring advertisement indicating some of the main performance-features of the production. From them we may deduce that the dominant image of the *Trial* play was of the violence inflicted on Christ by His tormentors. In contrast, the Late Banns attempt to defend the cycle against Protestant critics. In their extensive prologue they claim that the cycle was an innovatory Protestant evangelising activity designed to bring the Bible to the people in their own tongue, and that it is firmly grounded in the biblical narrative or in accepted authorities. They even provide a respectable ancestry for the cycle in the authorship by the famous Chester monk and historian Ranulf Higden and in the civic initiative of Chester's reputed first mayor, Sir John Arneway.<sup>5</sup> The description of the Passion-play is characteristic of this expansive and defensive approach.

The primary defence of the play is that the narrative contains the central point of Christian belief and that it needs to be reaffirmed because papist teaching has for so long obscured its true meaning in the popular mind. It seems probable that the Banns-author was thinking of the following Article of Faith, composed by the English Reformers for the Forty-two Articles of 1553 and reaffirmed as Article 31 of the Thirty-nine Articles of 1563:

The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone. Wherefore the sacrifices of Masses, in the which it was commonly said, that the Priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead, to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits.<sup>6</sup>

Like the Article, the Banns affirm the central and unique nature of Christ's sacrifice and draw attention to the way in which the confirming purpose of the Eucharist to the faithful has been obscured by the alternative or supplementary offering of sacrifice in private masses for the living and dead.

The Late Banns also draw attention to the violent character of this action of suffering and pathos, suggesting a climactic movement from the buffeting to the agony of the Passion itself. Aware of the dangerously emotive nature of such action, the Banns demand that it be played "soberly" and that the emphasis be laid upon the "dolefull" nature of Christ's death. Evidently, in keeping with the Banns' demand that audiences view the cycle "with quiett mynde" (210), the hope is that spectators will be led to a meditative distance from the action rather than to an emotional engagement in it, thoughtfully contemplating the suffering rather than reacting to the "horrors" stressed in the Early Banns. Dramatic effect serves devotional ends. The image of the 'Paschal Victim', of Christ's exemplary love and patient suffering, complements the theological defence of Christ's sacrifice.

Finally, the Banns circumscribe the action. Employing the terminology they use throughout their description, they point the hearer back to the underlying biblical "storye", the narrative-unit behind the text. This story is a process of trial and execution that begins when Jesus is dragged before the High Priests and is completed when the legal processes and their attendant sufferings have been followed through, the sentence has been carried out, and Christ is dead. It is the story of "Cristes dolefull deathe", and it is to end with the end of His sufferings - "till the laste of his breathe". It must therefore be an exceptionally long play within the cycle, prominent and potentially disruptive of processional continuity. Miller's version is certainly the longest play in the extant cycle.

*The Late Banns and the Extant Passion Play(s)*

Although the Late Banns were probably physically associated with the exemplar of the extant manuscripts, it has been accepted since F.M. Salter's discussion that they do not adequately or accurately describe the extant cycle.<sup>7</sup> L.M. Clopper, in the most recent discussion of the relationship of Banns and Cycle, concludes "Neither the Early Banns . . . nor the Late Banns describe the cycle as it exists in our texts; consequently, the texts may include late additions to the cycle or be copies of registers from which plays were selected for performance".<sup>8</sup> Space here permits only a cursory examination of the Passion play(s), but that will be sufficient to indicate that the *Trial* and the *Crucifixion* are actions so different in their dramatic conception that audiences would have difficulty in recognising the unity proposed by the Late Banns.

The *Trial* employs the formal image of judicial trial to investigate issues of authority. Jesus' appearance before the High Priests rapidly establishes the four recurring issues which dominate the trial - Jesus' claim to be Son of God and hence ultimate judge of mankind (Play 16, 45-8); the resulting threat to the divinely ordained law of the Jews (1-4, 59-65) and to the cohesion of the Jewish nation (5-8, 16-20); the vindictive violence and hatred of the Jews, which explodes in the Buffeting and which thereafter remains close to the surface of the ensuing debates; and the legalistic predicament of the Jews who, always dependent upon the consent of Roman law to their desire for vengeance, must re-argue their case in secular and reasoned terms (110-17).<sup>9</sup> The processes of the law provide a rational framework within which the struggle by the Jews for control of the action of the play can be structured and contained.

Under Roman law, which is concerned only with secular issues, the charge is changed from one of blasphemy to one of treason. The rational Pilate has no cause to seek revenge and, since Jesus declines to make any self-incriminating statement to him or to Herod, the Priests' case seems lost. It is the Priests' angry outburst and their insistence upon a capital sentence that bring about the key moment in the trial, the private dialogue between Pilate and Jesus (251-90) in which Jesus carefully distinguishes worldly and spiritual kingship and argues the absence of truth from earth because

. . . so deemed in yearth is hee  
of them that have non authoritie  
in yearth, agaynst reason. (288-90)

Jesus draws attention to the irrational nature of the Jews' accusation and the illegitimacy of their claim to authority. Pilate seems to accept this argument, which stands as a gloss on the ensuing Crucifixion, and seeks at once to appease the Jews and demonstrate the absurdity of their claim through a second act of violence, the Scourging, in which Christ is mocked as a play-king crowned with thorns and holding a reed sceptre. In the end, however, Pilate

yields to political threat and delivers Jesus for crucifixion.

Both words and movement mark the end of the Trial:

This [dome] is at an end.  
 Nowe read I that we wend  
 this shrewe for to shend  
 a little here besyde. (371-4)

The words indicate relief that the legal obstacles have been removed and that the Jews now control the action at will. It points a break with the structured framework which is more strongly signalled by Caiaphas' first words on the way to Calvary:

Nowe of this segger we binne seker.  
 Agaynst us boote he not to beker.  
 Though he flyre, flatter and flycker,  
 thys fiste shall he not flee. (Play 16A 1-4)

The urgent formality of the legal argument yields to a gloatingly triumphant tone; the formal procedures of the court-room to unrestrained and gratuitous physical aggression.

As the action unfolds, two features become clear. First, events are no longer logical or predictable. Though the Priests seem to have control of the action, it does not proceed as they planned. Even areas under their authority seem to acquire autonomy - the executioners have to be called back to their task on two occasions (65-6, 149-52), and even engage in dispute with Pilate (225-40). And the way to Calvary becomes a quest-like series of ostensibly random encounters and happenings. An atmosphere of uncertainty and hence of suspense results.

Secondly, the characters divide sharply into the believers and the non-believers, typified by the figures of the penitent and the impenitent thieves. Throughout, the Jews and their leaders remain jeering, brutal and uncomprehending. Against them stand the helpless victims: Simon of Cyrene, who affirms his faith (27-8); the lamenting women of Jerusalem; the weeping Maries at the cross. In His concern for the women (57-64), for His persecutors (298-300), for the penitent thief (321-4), and for His mother (325-9), Jesus manifests His selfless love for Man and His patient suffering. What He condemned in the *Trial* as an irrational and illegitimate abuse of power, He now forgives as an act of ignorance. The issues are argued in the *Trial*; the example is presented in the *Crucifixion*.

The fact that the two actions employ different concepts of drama and have different thematic foci seems to endorse the 'two-play' arrangement of the Group. But that arrangement is not unambiguous. The manuscripts set out the action as two plays, each with its own guild-ascription and title; but all assign the number 16 to the *Trial*, give no number to the *Crucifixion*, and continue with the *Harrowing* as Play 17. All include, at the end of the *Trial*, a misplaced fragment of Peter's Denial (not otherwise dramatised in the Cycle), with some wording at the end such as:

## Finis Paginae Decimae Sextae

This storye is finished in the leaves followinge.

(Hm)

Evidently the note distinguishes between a continuing narrative ("this storye") and a discontinuous dramatic division into two plays. The word 'story' is, however, one which occurs repeatedly in the Late Banns.<sup>10</sup> It is first used of the authorised material known to Higden (9), and it is finally used of the complete narrative told by the Cycle (213). The other fifteen occurrences refer to the narrative underlying the individual play, with which the 'story' is always co-terminal. It is tempting to assume that the choice of word in the colophon to Play 16 was influenced by its use in the Banns' description of the Passion-play and represents a conscious attempt to make good a discrepancy between the play-division in the extant cycle and that in the Banns. Such an attempt might also explain why the *Crucifixion* is not numbered. The Late Banns correctly refer to *playes xxiii<sup>tie</sup>* (14), since that is the number described. Recognising that the exemplar actually contained twenty-five plays and identifying the point of discrepancy, the numerator left the *Crucifixion* unnumbered. Rogers, in his *Breviary*, lists twenty-five plays but similarly claims that the cycle contained only twenty-four.

The numbering, the colophon, and/or a comparison of the exemplar with the associated Late Banns might all suggest to the careful Miller that the easiest way of resolving the discrepancy was to make the play-division co-terminal with the story by removing the inserted leaf with its colophon, omitting the guild-ascription and title to the *Crucifixion*, and producing a new ascription and title for the Passion-play. The result would not yield the theologically and dramatically unified play suggested by the Late Banns.

*The Ending of the Crucifixion-action*

Even if that proposal is not accepted, however, there can be little doubt that Miller's play is not that of the Late Banns. Those Banns specify an action which ends with the death of Christ, whereas the Group and H present two different continuations of the action beyond that point, dealing with the deposition and burial. It is perhaps dangerous to argue from what is *not* in the Banns, but here the specific "till the laste of his breathe" (and no further!) is understandable. Not only does the concluding action distract from the contemplation of the agonies of Christ; it also contains the legendary episode of the piercing of Christ's side by the blind knight Longinus and his miraculous healing by the blood and water which reach his eyes. Such an action, centring on a saint of the Catholic Church and having no scriptural authority, would be indefensible to a Protestant audience and could readily be omitted from the Passion.<sup>11</sup>

The continuations of the action seem to seek some controlling purpose for the apparently uncontrolled events leading up to the *Crucifixion*. The Group make the transition by the words *consummatum*

est (359+Latin), which are usually Christ's penultimate words from the cross but are here presented as His final words; they have no vernacular counterpart, and might be dismissed as a margin-reminder of an omission if it were not for the Centurion's words that follow:

I knowe by manner of his crye  
 hee hasse fulfilled the prophecye  
 and godhead shewed apertlye  
 in him, all men may knowe. (364-7)

The second line is a standard explanation of Christ's enigmatic cry, but serves to shift the emphasis from the suffering victim towards the fulfilment of a prophesied destiny and a controlling purpose. As a joyful convert, the Centurion becomes a Gentile witness.

A causative pattern is now restored as Caiaphas responds to the claim of the unlettered Centurion with a demonstration that Jesus is merely a man, not "Goddes Sonne almightie" (361):

But when thou seest his hart bleede,  
 lettes se what thou can saye.  
 Longys, take this speare in hand . . . (370-2)

Caiaphas seeks to regain control of the action, but the healing of blind Longinus affirms the truth of Christ's divinity, while demonstrating the power and the pity (401) of God. The miracle attests that events are under God's control. It represents the continuing extension of God's revelation to the Gentiles, and allows Longinus to declare his faith in the Resurrection and the restoration of Christ's power.

The play ends among Jesus' friends - Joseph, Nicodemus, Pilate and the Centurion. At the sight of the miracle, Joseph and Nicodemus are moved to scorn the Jews (409-11, 422-3), and Pilate willingly and unqualifiedly grants them Jesus' body. As Joseph takes it down, he (Joseph) declares Christ's divinity and his own belief in the coming Resurrection (440-55), and Nicodemus contributes an account of other confirmatory signs of Jesus' godhead. There is thus a positive and optimistic note of faith at the end of the play, combined with a sense that there is a controlling and purposive pattern to the events after all, and that all will be set to right with the play of the *Resurrection* (played on the next day).

The conclusion in H continues the polarisation of the preceding action, but with a reversed and harsh irony. The authority-figures remain unrepentant and unenlightened, while others recognise the error and foresee dire consequences that they are helpless to avert. Foremost among these last is the Centurion. He is convinced of Christ's divinity by "this noyce and this crye" (Appendix IC/6), which seems to suggest Jesus' committal of His spirit - since *consummatum est* does not appear in this version - together with some other sound-effect. Terrified, he recalls the



prophecy and includes himself in the collective guilt - "we have wrought wilfully" (2). Caiaphas ignores this profession, telling the Centurion to shut up and remember who pays him. And therefore Longinus' action has no logical motivation but remains yet another arbitrary act of violence which has unforeseen results.

The fear and the warning note of the centurion are taken up by Joseph in his affirmation of faith, which includes a warning to the Jews of ultimate retribution:

Vengeanc uppon you, witterly  
I warrand, sone shall fall. (47-8)

And his bitterness is not only directed at the Priests. Joseph and Nicodemus go to Pilate "to ask his body of our fone" (71: italics mine), and Joseph's tone is again challenging and accusatory:

The body of my lord, messy,  
that you neiled on a tree,  
graunt us, lord, in suffraynty . . . (81-3: italics  
mine.)

Pilate responds suspiciously, releasing the body with the condition that Joseph make no attempt "to rayse him up agayne" (96); Joseph retorts that Christ will need no help to do that.

Beside this current of bitter hostility to Christ's persecutors runs an intention to accord the crucified Christ the reverence which the Jews have sought to deny Him. Joseph's initial condemnation of the Jews is combined with the proposal to Nicodemus that they should go and worship Christ to obtain the reward of Heaven:

Nichodemus, sir, both you and I  
have cause to worship him witterly  
and his body glorifye,  
for Gods Sonne he is.  
Therfor, goe we by and bye  
and worshim him devoutly,  
for we may therwith, perdy,  
win us heaven-blisse. (53-60)

The 'worship' takes the form of an affirmation and a prayer by Joseph before the historical crucifix, an act in which he is joined by Nicodemus (111):

A, swet Jesu, Jesu, swet Jesu,  
that thou must dye full well thou knewe.  
Lord, thou graunt us grace and vertue  
to serve the in our lyfe,  
that they to thy blisse renew,  
all that ever to thee be true;  
for emperour, kinge, knight ne Jew,  
with thee they dare not stryve. (101-8)

The speech affirms Jesus' foreknowledge of His death, suggesting the

controlling plan of God, and emphasises the power which God can unleash against earthly rulers such as those who have crucified Him. The prayer is an exemplary petition for grace and its rewards.

The strange tableau of the worshippers before the crucifix is outside the historical action of the play. The Protestant objections to it may easily be anticipated. It is unbiblical. It is blasphemous, in that the prayer is addressed to the actor-God - the Late Banns are particularly sensitive to criticism about the impersonation of God, stressing that "noe man can proportion that Godhead" (198) and drawing attention to the 'disfiguring' effect of "the face-gilte". And by proposing the adoration of an image of Christ, it falls under the same condemnation as the adoration of the crucifix in the Catholic Church. The latter, prohibited under Article 22 of the Thirty-nine Articles concerning "worshipping and adoration as well of Images as of Reliques", was held to be dangerously misleading because the image and what it represented could become easily confused in the popular mind:

When ye give the outward reverence, when ye  
adore it [the Cross], will not the simple deem  
great virtue in it?<sup>12</sup>

Kneeling before a Cross, to worship it, is manifest idolatry and expressly forbidden by the law of God.<sup>13</sup>

It seems then probable that the ending in H represents a 'Catholic' ending, that the ending in the Group represents a 'Protestant' reworking of the same material, and that the Late Banns suggest that it was safest to exclude the deposition and burial with its legendary material entirely.

In his will, James Miller left a significant collection of books - "Latine bookes of Diuinity or other in Latin with all my songe bookes in Latine" and "all the rest of my English bookes, Historyes, Chronicles and Diuinity whatsoever".<sup>14</sup> His interest in the cycle was evidently scholarly and antiquarian, directed by a desire to re-create a coherent cycle from the alternatives available in the exemplar.<sup>15</sup> As a cleric he could hardly be unaware of the 'Catholic tendencies' in his chosen ending to the Passion, but as an antiquarian he would find these proof of its historical priority. But in dealing with the 'two-play' division, he seems to have been misled by the play-numbering, the colophon and/or the description in the Banns into setting out as a single play two quite distinct actions which belong to the earlier 'two-play' tradition. The result in H is a play which does not correspond to that described in the Late Banns, and which indeed is unlikely ever to have been performed in the streets of Chester.

NOTES

- 1 For descriptions of these manuscripts, see R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, ed., *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, Vol. I, EETS SS 3 (London, 1974) pp.ix-xxvii. All quotations from the cycle text are taken from this edition.
- 2 Hermann Deimling, ed., *The Chester Plays: Part I*, EETS ES 62 (London, 1892) pp.xxiii-xxvi; W.W. Greg, "Bibliographical and Textual Problems of the English Miracle Cycles", *The Library*, 3rd ser., V, No.17 (1914) pp.180-6; F.M. Salter, "The 'Trial and Flagellation': a New Manuscript", and W.W. Greg, "Appendix - Remarks on the Relation of the Manuscripts" in W.W. Greg ed., *The Trial and Flagellation with Other Studies in the Chester Cycle*, Malone Society (London, 1935) pp.1-83.
- 3 On Miller's practice, see further R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents, With an Essay, "Music in the Cycle"*, by Richard Rastall (Chapel Hill, 1983) pp.71-6. All quotations from the Banns are taken from this volume (hereafter, *Essays*).
- 4 In their edition, Lumiansky-Mills state of A: "No folios seem lost at the beginning, although the possibility exists that originally the Banns may have preceded the plays" (p.xv). In their edition of *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A Reduced Facsimile of Huntington Library MS 2* (Leeds, 1980), under "E. The Lost Folios", they review the possibility of prefatory Banns to Hm and speculate that "HM2 never did include the Banns". F.M. Salter, "The Banns of the Chester Cycle", *RES* 15 (1939) pp.441-4, suggests reasons for the curtailment or omission of the Banns in the cyclic manuscripts.
- 5 These traditions have most recently been discussed in L.M. Clopper, "Arnewaye, Higden and the Origin of the Chester plays", *REED Newsletter* 8, No.2 (1983) pp.4-11.
- 6 Quoted from the *Book of Common Prayer*. See also Thomas Rogers, *The Catholic Doctrine of the Church of England: An Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles*, Parker Society (Cambridge, 1844) pp.296-301.
- 7 *loc.cit.*, pp.445-6.
- 8 L.M. Clopper, "The History and Development of the Chester Cycle", *MP* 75 (1978) p.241.
- 9 Lumiansky-Mills assign the number 16A to the unnumbered *Crucifixion* play in Hm and print the ending to the play in H as Appendix IC of their edition. Here, the play number is given at the first reference but not thereafter repeated.
- 10 At lines 9, 21, 37, 76, 81, 84, 86, 104, 127, 130, 136, 142, 154, 162, 165, 190, 213. In the Early Banns it occurs only once, at 31 referring to the play of *Noyes shipp*; the *Temptation* is called "an history of the best" (86).
- 11 See Rose Jeffries Peebles, *The Legend of Longinus in Ecclesiastical Tradition and in English Literature and its Connections with the Grail* (Baltimore, 1911).
- 12 James Calphill, *An Answer to John Martiall's Treatise of the Cross*, ed. R. Gibbings, Parker Society (Cambridge, 1846) p.386.
- 13 William Fulke, *Stapleton's Fortress Overthrown*, ed. R. Gibbings, Parker

Society (Cambridge, 1848) p.210. See also *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol.4, 'Cross', p.479.

- <sup>14</sup> Miller's will is in the Diocesan Repository at the Cheshire County Record Office, Chester. See David Mills, "James Miller: The Will of a Chester Scribe", *REED Newsletter* 9, No. 1 (1984) pp.11-12.
- <sup>15</sup> On alternatives in the cyclic exemplar, see *Essays*, pp.33-7.