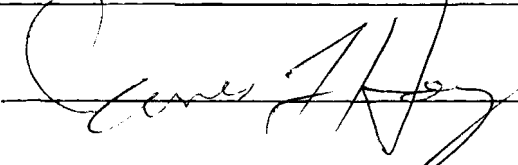


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Roger L. Haden for the Master of Arts
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Title: "ILKE A CREATURE, TAKES ENTENTE": AN INVESTIGATION
OF PURPOSE AND EFFECTIVENESS IN MEDIEVAL CORPUS CHRISTI DRAMA

Abstract approved: 

Until the last thirty years, modern criticism's interest in medieval drama has been primarily historical, concerned with sources, dates, dialects, etc. Even more recent criticism often centers on important but external or fragmentary features--the mechanics of staging, elements of social satire, the development of humor, etc. An issue that is often ignored or forgotten, however, is that of determining why medieval audiences enjoyed this drama enough to cause it to remain popular for two centuries. To do so requires some understanding of medieval perspectives toward art.

The drama shared with the mainstream of medieval art and literature close ties with religion and strong didactic

tendencies. Recognizing these characteristics requires to some degree recognizing that medieval and modern perspectives toward the universe and, hence, toward art as an expression of man's place in that universe are different, indeed, often opposed. Fully to understand the art of the Middle Ages, then, demands of modern readers the willingness to alter their own perspective in order to approach the drama in something of a medieval spirit. Specifically, modern readers must expect an art consistent with a hierarchical view of the created universe, the primary significance of which lay in its teleological expression of divine order. Such a view led in the Middle Ages to utilitarian aesthetics--an appreciation of art as a functional element of life.

Medieval drama, in particular, functioned as an occasion for festive, communal celebration and as an important adjunct to religious worship. It established its effectiveness through conscious appeals to its audience's aesthetic expectations in order to make its message--the Christian story of man's degeneracy and God's love--intelligible and to create an experience that would make that message personally relevant to each member of the audience.

The drama accomplished this purpose by employing three primary modes of expression that were dominant in the later Middle Ages: personification, symbolism, and naturalism. Through these techniques, the drama subtly but consciously

involved the audience as participant within the play world itself and produced a dramatic experience with intense personal significance for the audience in general and each individual in particular.

"ILKE A CREATURE, TAKES ENTENTE":
AN INVESTIGATION OF PURPOSE AND EFFECTIVENESS
IN MEDIEVAL CORPUS CHRISTI DRAMA

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PREFACE

I first approached the study of medieval Corpus Christi drama with an interest more the result of historical curiosity than of aesthetic appreciation. In the course of that study, however, I began to question the validity of the aesthetic standards through which my initial evaluation had been formed. Although great art has about it a quality that transcends the limitations of time, aesthetic and artistic standards reflect to a large extent the particular exigencies of time and place. The present paper focuses on the particular exigencies of time and place of medieval England in an attempt to determine what medieval dramatists and audiences expected of their drama, as these expectations greatly controlled the creation of the drama and the degree to which these expectations were met controlled its appreciation. The present study is not, therefore, an attempt to claim for medieval drama artistic excellence under modern criteria, although such claims are being made with some justification. Rather, this study attempts to provide some understanding of the Corpus Christi drama in the totality of its effectiveness as a communal, religious, and dramatic experience for its contemporary audience.

I wish here to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to Dr. James Hoy for his support and expert criticism of this study. I extend my appreciation, also, to Dr. William Cogswell for his editorial expertise and useful suggestions. Finally, I especially thank my wife, Alice, for her patience and understanding, and my daughter, Jennifer, who graciously shared her father's time with his books.

R. L. H.

Emporia, Kansas

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INTRODUCTION

In attempting to explain the fluctuations of fortune in the oscillating political world of ancient Rome presented in Shakespeare's Coriolanus, Tullus Aufidius resigns himself to the fact that our virtues "Lie in th' interpretation of the time. . ./One fire drives out one fire; one nail, one nail;/Rights by rights falter, strengths by strengths do fail" (IV, vii, ll. 50, 54-55). What Aufidius accepts as the fate of man's virtues is also strikingly applicable to the virtues of man's creations, notably his art. There is in the field of literature, perhaps, no better illustration of this than in the fluctuating critical fortunes of the Medieval Corpus Christi drama. Largely ignored except by antiquarians before the Twentieth Century, this drama has since undergone various critical interpretations ranging from general disfavor to high praise. . . Even a brief review of modern criticism of the Corpus Christi drama reveals that its virtues are indeed subject to the interpretations of the times. Unfortunately, many of these interpretations often fail to consider an issue basic to a full understanding of this drama--its dramatic effectiveness and its popularity with its original audience.

For most of the first half of this century the Corpus Christi drama remained the exclusive domain of philologists and literary or theatre historians. Generally viewed as crude, inartistic productions, these plays attracted for the most part only those scholars whose interest in them lay in their usefulness as historical documents or as effective foils to the Elizabethan theatre. The dominant influence on criticism of drama during this period was exerted by E. K. Chambers' two-volume work The Medieval Stage.¹ Written during a period when analogies with the theory of biological evolution greatly influenced study in other areas of human development, Chambers' work is a thorough and scholarly historical account of the development of medieval drama. This drama evolved, according to Chambers, from its liturgical beginnings to the full vernacular cycles through a process termed "secularization." While providing an enormous wealth of historical detail and information concerning the medieval drama and making great strides toward achieving the important goal of establishing reliable texts and editorial commentary, Chambers' historical emphasis tended, on the whole, to minimize the dramatic and literary effectiveness of the religious drama. Continuing and expanding this historical approach, such notable critics as Karl Young² and Hardin Craig³ pre-

¹Edmund K. Chambers, The Medieval Stage, 2 vols.

²Karl Young, Drama of the Medieval Church, 2 vols.

³Hardin Craig, English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages.

sented, until recently, a solid and relatively unchallenged body of scholarly criticism which viewed the cycle plays in what Rosemary Woolf has termed "the long shadow of Renaissance contempt."⁴ Despite an early "Plea for the Study of the Corpus Christi Plays as Dramatic Art" by Professor George Coffman in 1929,⁵ these plays attracted so little aesthetic attention until mid-century that E. Catherine Dunn, writing in 1955 of "The Miracle Play as an Art Form," was prompted to note the "perilous" nature of her then novel approach.⁶ As recently as 1972, M. James Young alluded to the persistent, and in his view detrimental, presence of the historical approach: "With few exceptions, theatre and drama historians, along with philologists, have done an excellent job destroying the English Mystery cycles."⁷

Still, one nail drives out another; Fortune, if you will, gave her wheel one-half turn and the heretofore neglected artistic virtues of the Corpus Christi drama were discovered (or rediscovered).

⁴Rosemary Woolf, The English Mystery Plays, p. 323.

⁵George R. Coffman, "A Plea for the Study of the Corpus Christi Plays as Dramatic Art," Studies in Philology, 26 (1929), 411-24.

⁶E. Catherine Dunn, "The Miracle Play as an Art Form," Catholic Art Quarterly, 19 (1956), 48.

⁷M. James Young, "The Unity of the English Mystery Cycles," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (1972), 327.

The first stirrings toward a new evaluation of medieval drama began with the challenge to many of the basic critical assumptions of the historical approach. Three works instrumental in the formulation of this challenge are especially worth noting. The first work seriously to question the evolutionary development of the Corpus Christi drama⁸ was H. C. Gardiner's Mysteries' End: An Investigation of the Last Days of The Medieval Religious Stage.⁹ Gardiner proposed that these plays did not grow slowly into a sessile stage, as it were, so as to metamorphose into the Elizabethan theatre; rather they contained enough dramatic vitality in their representations of older beliefs to pose a threat to the newer forms of religion--a threat that resulted in their suppression by state authorities. Following Gardiner's work by several years, Glynn Wickham in Early English Stages 1300 to 1600,¹⁰ not only suggested that the liturgical drama of the Middle Ages was dramatically distinct from the vernacular cycles, but investigated and presented many instances of correspondence between the dramatic activities inherent in the medieval

⁸Stanley J. Kahrl, "The Civic Religious Drama of Medieval England: A Review of Recent Scholarship," Renaissance Drama, 6 (1973), 237.

⁹Harold D. Gardiner, Mysteries' End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage.

¹⁰Glynn Wickham, Early English Stages: 1300-1660, Vol. I, 1300-1576.

tournaments, royal processions, and street pageants and the Corpus Christi cycle drama. Wickham's study effectively challenged the view of medieval dramaturgy as naive or unsophisticated. A third study seriously to question the assumptions of the evolutionary approach was that of O. B. Hardison, Jr.¹¹ Arguing that there was indeed a sharp distinction between the early Latin liturgical drama and the later vernacular cycles, Hardison asserted that the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman presented a fully developed set of vernacular plays which contained many of the dramatic qualities of the later Corpus Christi cycles¹²--a point which argued strongly against an evolutionary development.

With the basic assumptions of the historical and evolutionary approaches to medieval drama under question, many literary and dramatic critics have begun to re-evaluate the aesthetic qualities of these cycle dramas. Indicative of the direction in which recent criticism has been moving are such titles as "The Miracle Play as an Art Form,"¹³ "The Literary Style of the Towneley Plays,"¹⁴ "The Corpus

¹¹O. B. Hardison, Jr., Christian Rite and Christian Drama.

¹²Kahrl, p. 243.

¹³Dunn, pp. 48-56.

¹⁴E. Catherine Dunn, "The Literary Style of the Towneley Plays," American Benedictine Review, 20 (1969), 601-28.

Christi Passion Plays as Dramatic Art,"¹⁵ "Dramatic Technique in the Corpus Christi 'Creation and Fall,'"¹⁶ and "The Art of the York Realist."¹⁷ Of course, not all critics are in agreement as to the particular merits of any one cycle or of individual plays within cycles. Nor do they view the Corpus Christi drama as without weakness. But much recent criticism seems to be in agreement on the general assumption that this drama presents a body of dramatic literature with sufficient artistic merit to be worthy of study in its own right and not merely as medieval social document or as the predecessor of the Elizabethan stage.

While this more recent move toward the critical assessment of the Corpus Christi drama as art is to be welcomed, the danger arises that many of the valid judgements of the historical approach may be discarded along with those that have been effectively challenged. In order to simplify some of the rather complex issues of these two approaches, it may be helpful to view the historical position as arguing that

¹⁵Waldo F. McNeir, "The Corpus Christi Passion Plays as Dramatic Art," Studies in Philology, 48 (1951), 601-28.

¹⁶Robert Brawer, "Dramatic Technique in the Corpus Christi 'Creation and Fall'," Modern Language Quarterly, 32 (1971), 347-64.

¹⁷J. W. Robinson, "The Art of the York Realist," Modern Philology, 60 (1963), 241-51.

criticism cannot ignore the religious nature and purpose of the Corpus Christi drama and, since these plays were not intended to be dramatic but religious, they cannot be good drama.¹⁸ On the other hand, the more recent viewpoint seems to be that despite the Biblical subject and the religious nature, these plays were dramatic in intention, or at least in effect.

It may be, perhaps, that much of this conflict is more apparent than real. Recognizing the validity of both critical perspectives to a degree may at least partially resolve some of the apparent differences. It would indeed be a mistake to ignore or deny the fact that medieval drama was closely allied with religion. But the drama was not unique in that respect. Most medieval art was in some way closely associated with religion, and was socially functional as well. Generally, that art functioned to demonstrate or enhance the importance of a church or cathedral, a donor, a patron, or a festival.¹⁹ More specifically, the Corpus Christi drama functioned in a religious capacity to represent in the most comprehensible terms the Christian message of salvation; and in a secular capacity, this drama was an outward manifestation of the economic and social vitality of the towns with which it was

¹⁸Craig, pp. 2, 4, et passim.

¹⁹Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, p. 258.

associated. While such a subject and purpose may seem somewhat offensive to modern advocates of "pure" art, they do not necessarily preclude conscious artistry--in either intent or effect. If this were not so, modern criticism would have to dismiss the art of, say, Giotto or Titian or Jan van Eyck as primitive, unsophisticated, and without artistic design. But an appreciation of art lies not in determining the motives behind its creation, though such knowledge may add some resonant effect. Rather an appreciation of art results from an engagement with the created product. The close association between medieval cycle plays and medieval religion does not in itself justify a dismissal of the drama as art. Nor should modern readers err in the other direction--that of, in evaluating the artistic effectiveness of the cycle plays, underestimating or ignoring the possibilities of their religious elements as artistic strengths.

It is in these fluctuating attempts either to reject or to defend the medieval cycle dramas as literary or dramatic art that much modern criticism often fails to address a major issue. Time and the paucity of complete records leave few certainties concerning the Corpus Christi cycles. But of some things there can be certainty, and one of these has to do with the popularity of the Corpus Christi drama with its medieval audience. These plays were an important thread woven into the fabric of medieval English society.

Various guild and town corporation records attest both to the importance of these plays within the civic framework and to the fact that they were extremely expensive undertakings, requiring the effort of the entire community.²⁰ Despite this heavy burden on time and finances, however, these cycles continued to be produced in several localities often year after year for 200 years.²¹ Moreover, during that time these plays provided the vast majority of English society with their only form of dramatic entertainment. In his study of the drama in Chester, F. M. Salter noted: "For dramatic longevity their only rival is Shakespeare; and I take it that the real duty of criticism is not to brush them aside as crude and childish, but to ask what there was in them that could appeal to sane and sensible men in a civilized country for more than 200 years."²² An issue modern criticism should not ignore, then, is the attempt to determine why this drama was so popular--what there was in these plays that held such an enduring appeal for their audiences.

This study seeks to investigate this issue of dramatic effectiveness in three steps. Step one will be to examine

²⁰F. M. Salter, Medieval Drama in Chester, p. 80.

²¹Albert C. Baugh, ed., A Literary History of England, 2nd ed., pp. 279, 282.

²²Salter, p. 83.

the difference between medieval and modern perspectives in an attempt to determine, to at least some degree, why many modern readers often fail to appreciate fully the Corpus Christi drama. The second step will be to investigate the role of art in the life of the Middle Ages and some of the ways in which that role informed medieval aesthetic and dramatic principles. The final step will be to examine the effects of these aesthetic and dramatic principles on the Corpus Christi drama and attempt to determine some of the ways in which the cycle plays conformed to those principles that governed both their creation and their appreciation, and the ways in which these dramas transcended the limiting effects attendant on those principles by involving their audiences in a dramatic experience that was consciously, and effectively, both instructive and entertaining.

CHAPTER ONE

It is the dual nature of instruction and entertainment in medieval cycle drama that creates much of the problem for modern criticism. Much of the failure to appreciate fully the effectiveness of a complete cycle lies in the modern distaste for overtly instructive literature. Modern approaches to medieval drama often seem to share an underlying principle: that "the religious plays are judged good by the degree to which they are not religious."²³ Hence, critics approach this drama under an a priori assumption that religious purpose counteracts conscious artistry and concern themselves only with external historical matters: guild records, dates, sources, verse forms, linguistic peculiarities, etc. Or, they search piecemeal for the "art" of the cycles in the secular elements: burlesque, satire, humor, realism, etc. Thus, both those critics who dismiss the cycle plays as crude, naive, and childish productions and those who attempt a more sympathetic interpretation often ignore the potential artistic strength in the religious element--an element so vital that Professor Craig called it the "life-blood" of the drama.²⁴

²³Eleanor Prosser, Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays, p. 9.

²⁴Craig, p. 4.

If modern criticism hopes to determine how the cycles could remain consistently effective to a medieval audience for two centuries, it can ill afford to ignore or discount such an integral part of the total dramatic experience.

Indeed, those critical approaches that do so are never fully satisfactory. Such studies either fail to address the issue of dramatic and artistic effectiveness, or do so in such a fragmentary manner as to create misleading perceptions of this effectiveness.²⁵ David Mills, in an analysis of the three primary approaches to medieval drama--the liturgical, the literary, and the dramatic--found each unsatisfactory in itself. His summary notes the complexities involved in the study of this drama and offers a possible reason for the failure of modern criticism to appreciate these plays:

However we regard the cycles, we should be aware of the difficulties in applying to them modern ideas of "play" or "drama." While critics since Chambers may have oversimplified the historical evolution of medieval drama, their studies have suggested that the cycles were the meeting-point of a number of influences, not all of which would be acceptable in a modern concept of drama.²⁶

Modern criticism fails to come completely to terms with medieval drama largely because the principles informing modern perspectives are different from those that informed medieval

²⁵James Young, p. 327.

²⁶David Mills, "Approaches to Medieval Drama," Leeds Studies in English, n.s. 3 (1969), 59.

perspectives. As Young noted, "The ultimate reason for our failure to see the plays in the unity of their creation is that we have come so far from the medieval mind. Never have two frames of reference been more diametrically opposed than the medieval and modern."²⁷ It may, of course, be noted that modern man still shares the Christian tradition with his medieval ancestors. But it must also be recognized, as Eleanor Prosser noted, that modern Christianity is not practiced in the same way that it was in the Middle Ages.²⁸ The modern and medieval mind sets are in many ways opposed to each other. As a result of this opposition, the cycle dramas often fall prey to a severe degree of temporal jingoism nurtured by 600 years of intellectual, literary, and dramatic development.

One of the greatest obstacles to overcome is the modern tendency to treat the cycle plays as closet dramas. They were not. These plays were not meant to be read, but seen and heard. To apply principles of modern aesthetics to these plays through close literary analysis creates a distorted perception of their purpose, technique, and effectiveness. Such a view exhibits a sort of "temporocentrism"--the tacit belief in the intrinsic value of modern critical standards

²⁷James Young, p. 327.

²⁸Prosser, p. 12.

and the application of those standards to the literature of the past. Forgetting the inherent historicity of the literature, critical studies may treat the medieval drama as if it were modern drama and find strengths or weaknesses in the plays as they conform to or deviate from modern aesthetic expectations. Viewed through the modern perspective, then, the medieval cycles may very well seem crude, inartistic, even distasteful. On the other hand, finding in these plays some conformity to modern aesthetic or dramatic expectations, studies may overly applaud these as instances of early support for modern critical standards. This, as Professor Craig noted, "is to bring the wrong equipment" to the study of medieval drama.²⁹

What, then, is the correct equipment? By what standards should medieval drama be judged? The groundwork for answering these questions lies in understanding the medieval perspectives which informed medieval aesthetics. By helping condition our aesthetic expectations of this drama, such understanding should help condition our critical response toward it and bring that response more in line with that of a medieval audience for which the plays were presented.

A starting point for this understanding is the recognition of the unique and rather surprising homogeneity in what may be termed the medieval cast of mind. The collective mind

²⁹Craig, p. 4.

set of the Middle Ages was the result of a unique merging of Christian theology and pagan philosophy.³⁰ Perhaps, as C. S. Lewis suggested, these two elements were not always the easiest of bedfellows,³¹ yet religion and philosophy were much more closely aligned in the Middle Ages than at any time since. They formed the punch and die, as it were, and together impressed the collective medieval mind with its particular stamp: a homogeneity of thought that is at best often misunderstood by modern students and is for many inconceivable. The thought of the Middle Ages had not undergone the fragmentation that has characterized the development of modern thought. Hence, the antithesis perceived by modern thought between paganism and Christianity did not form a substantial obstacle in medieval thought. The medieval mind, with its belief in systems and its propensity to organize, borrowed freely from many sources--pagan and Christian--and fitted these, like pieces of a puzzle, into a unique perspective of the universe. If modern readers hope to approach medieval drama in anything like the medieval spirit of mind, this view of the universe must be of major concern to them.

During any period of time, the appreciation of art is

³⁰C. S. Lewis, The Discarded Image, see esp. chs. 2, 3, and 4.

³¹Lewis, p. 18.

greatly conditioned by the accepted perspective toward the universe and the human condition within that universe. If we see the universe as basically hostile toward the individual man, we tend to see a protagonist involved in some type of meaningful conflict with those forces--cosmic, social, psychological--which would cripple or destroy him. And, perhaps, we wish to see him triumph at least in knowledge. As part of our aesthetic expectations, we wish to follow a progress of growth or understand the absence of such growth. If, on the other hand, we were to view the universe, hostile and capricious as it may be, as only the imperfect symbol and type of another world, beneficent and immutable, our aesthetic expectations would be much differently conditioned. We would not wish to see meaningful conflict but, rather, the restored order of the universal hierarchy. We might still see a movement in the protagonist, but it would be a movement toward knowledge gained not in conflict but in harmony with the universal forces. Medieval man in general looked out on a universe of order, harmony, and balance; this view informed his aesthetics, which in turn informed his art. This medieval perspective toward the universe is of crucial importance to a full understanding of medieval art in general and the Corpus Christi drama in particular.

The opposition between the medieval perspective and the modern poses one of the greatest obstacles to modern

appreciation of the cycle drama. The difference between the two lies in the opposition of their respective dominant conventions. D. W. Robertson described the dominant characteristic of medieval thought as the tendency to think in terms of symmetrical patterns, harmoniously arranged with reference to an abstract hierarchy; and the dominant characteristic of modern thought as the tendency to think in terms of opposites whose dynamic interaction leads to a synthesis.³² Where modern thinkers distrust systems, the medieval thinkers were builders of systems. Where modern thought perceives an antithesis between the individual and the group and fears the dehumanizing effects of group systems, medieval man sought identity and purpose in the communal expression of a divine plan. Where modern man looks out into an unknown universe-- vast, cold, void, awesome in its "otherness"--and is frightened by forces imperfectly understood, medieval man looked inward into a universe of light and music, sought safety and perfection therein, and was, perhaps, somewhat calmed by the image of divine order he perceived.

In the introductory chapter of his Preface to Chaucer, Professor Robertson thoroughly examined the contrast between the medieval and modern modes of thought and the resulting differences in aesthetic effects produced by these modes.

³²D. W. Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer, p. 7.

His conclusion is well worth repeating here:

To conclude, the medieval world was innocent of our profound concern for tension. We have come to view ourselves as bundles of polarities and tensions in which, to use one formulation, the ego is caught between the omnivorous demands of the id on the one hand, and the more or less irrational restraints of the superego on the other. Romantic synthesis has in our day become "adjustment" or "equilibrium." As John Middleton Murray puts it, we demand that poetic expression, which consists of thought charged with an "emotional field," should "not merely thrill but also still our hearts." Nothing seems more natural in the analysis of events than the establishment of a polarity as a coordinate system against which variation of any kind can be measured. We project dynamic polarities on history as class struggles, balances of power, or as conflicts between economic realities and traditional ideals. In our metaphysics we find them operating between Being and non-Being. In architecture we have developed styles involving obvious, rather than concealed, cantilevered or counterbalanced masses, seemingly suspended without support. We demand tensions in literary art--ambiguities, situational ironies, tensions in figurative language, tensions between fact and symbol or between reality and the dream. . . . But the medieval world with its quiet hierarchies knew nothing of these things. Its aesthetic, at once a continuation of classical philosophy and a product of Christian teaching, developed artistic and literary styles consistent with a world without dynamically interacting polarities.³³

The medieval conception of the universe saw all of nature existing in a vast hierarchy emanating from God. In the proper order of relationships along this great chain of existence, superiors ruled inferiors and everything on earth was related to some force in the heavens.³⁴ This hierarchical mode of

³³Robertson, p. 51.

³⁴Frederick B. Artz, The Mind of the Middle Ages, 3rd ed., p. 235.

thought, itself a product of the medieval propensity to organize and systematize, found expression in works characterized by encyclopedic and instructive tendencies. Two of the most characteristic literary modes of the Middle Ages, the allegory and the mirror, for example, aimed at compendious inclusiveness and the generalized presentation of ideals.³⁵ The mainstream of thought in the Middle Ages tended toward the revelation of God's hand in every aspect of nature; all of nature held significance in this search. The medieval cycle drama, taking as its scope the whole of human history as it was then understood and not fearing to enact miracles or portray supernatural beings, is a manifestation of this medieval tendency to conceptualize all of Creation in terms of hierarchical structure and teleological significance.

Understanding the implications that this hierarchical mode of thought held for medieval art in general and the Corpus Christi drama in particular requires the modern reader to adjust his own perspective. Two specific assumptions generally held by modern readers in regard to medieval drama must be re-examined: (1) that because of the teleological influence, medieval literature is essentially non-dramatic; and (2) that the didactic or instructive features of the drama necessarily reduce its effectiveness as art.

³⁵James I. Wimsatt, Allegory and Mirror, p. 31.

The first assumption is, perhaps, the result of post-romantic prejudices. After noting that medieval art and literature were "less dramatic than their romantic counterparts," Professor Robertson further noted that a dramatic mode (i.e., dramatic in the modern sense) required a "free revelation of the inner feelings of the personae," and that "violent emotional states resulting from a conflict between the will of the protagonist and obstacles of some kind seem to be necessary to our sense of the dramatic."³⁶ The crucial question here, it would seem, is whether we can successfully and fairly impose our "sense of the dramatic" on literature governed by aesthetics of hierarchy and order, not conflict. Although a modern reader will never be completely able to appreciate medieval drama in the same way as a medieval audience, as critic he must be prepared to meet the drama on its own ground--be prepared, in short, to redefine the dramatic sense in relation to these plays. The need for such readjustment results from a basic conflict between medieval and modern dramatic practice. In his analysis of the Wakefield Cycle John Gardner described this conflict:

In fact, the method of individual mystery pageants at their best is in fundamental conflict with most modern dramatic practice. The basic Aristotelian idea of conflict resulting in a causally related series of events which, taken together, make

³⁶Robertson, p. 33.

up a complete action--Aristotle's energia (the actualization of the potential which exists in character and situation)--can have no place in drama based not on a theory of reality as process but on a theory of reality as stasis. If reality is the unchanging Supreme Good, if Nature is God's revelation of Himself in emblematic form, and if the proper response to this mutable world is the search within it for the vestiga or traces of God's hand, the immutable principle, then a concern with action is not only unwarranted but perverse, a failure of right reason.³⁷

There is, however, action in the cycle plays. Indeed action and movement become a controlling metaphor in these dramas. Throughout the cycles occur a series of comings and goings, journeys far and near, ascents and descents of men, angels, demons. The cycles are characterized by the "turbulent, undirected, indiscriminatory" often chaotic energy of what V. A. Kolve termed "Natural Man."³⁸ This natural man is man after the Fall, severed from God both as a creature (hence inferior to God) and as a willful, corrupted insubordinate, and the drama's emphasis on movement and action reflects this essential medieval conception of fallen man.

Thus, although the medieval world view was characterized by hierarchical order, this world view, in envisioning an ideal, was not ignorant of actualities. Indeed, it accounted for them in a way that kept the ideal order intact: conflict in the universe there was but not conflict with the universe.

³⁷John W. Gardner, The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle, p. 10.

³⁸V. A. Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi, p. 206 ff.

The conflict was lateral not vertical, between God's lower, imperfect creatures, and resulted not from the opposition of equal forces but from improper inferior-superior relationships--corrupted order brought about by corrupted wills. The medieval cosmology located earth on the very rim of creation³⁹ and identified as her ruling intelligence Fortune, whose very essence and divinely ordained function was movement, fluctuation, rising and falling. Hence, man was almost constantly in a state of conflict. But the resolution of that conflict lay not in any type of romantic synthesis but in a restored hierarchical order--inferiors must obey superiors within the hierarchical chain. To the medieval mind, to have the will of man locked in a struggle against opposing forces of the universe would indeed be a failure of right reason--a perversion of the proper order. Human drama, then, resulted from this imperfect and corrupted nature of God's lesser creatures and occurred along a lateral plane within the fallen world of man. In a study of dramatic mimesis in the "Fall of Lucifer" plays, R. W. Hanning noted that drama, which as a form belonged to God's lesser creatures, resulted from a conflict between the "properly and the improperly directed will of the creature."⁴⁰

³⁹Lewis, p. 116.

⁴⁰R. W. Hanning, "'You Have Begun a Parlous Pleye': The Nature and Limits of Dramatic Mimesis as a Theme in Four Middle English 'Fall of Lucifer' Plays," Comparative Drama, 7 (1973), 29.

The second assumption, that didactic art is necessarily improper art, is closely related to the first. Just as man, possessor of free will, can properly or improperly direct that will, he can properly or improperly create and appreciate his art. Hence, the proper use of art as a subordinate to and an aid of religious worship became an important informing principle in the Middle Ages. The problem for modern criticism arises from the definition of what makes proper art. Resulting from a reaction to the informing perspectives of the medieval aesthetics, the modern definition of proper art is often opposed to the medieval definition. Perhaps a comparison between the medieval point of view and that of James Joyce in his A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, where the latter may be fairly taken as a characteristic of modern aesthetic practice, can illuminate this difference.

Joyce, speaking through the young Stephan Dedalus, called that art proper which "wakens, or ought to awaken, or induces, or ought to induce an esthetic stasis, an ideal pity or an ideal terror, a stasis called forth, prolonged, and at last dissolved by what I call the rhythm of beauty."⁴¹ Improper art is that which excites kinetic responses; desire or loathing. "Desire," noted Joyce, "urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from

⁴¹James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, p. 206.

something. The arts which excite them, pornographical and didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion. . .is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing."⁴²

This theory echoes Murray's statement noted above by Robertson, that poetic expression should "still our hearts," and elucidates much of the problem faced by modern readers of medieval drama. For, as has been noted, the conception of that drama became possible through the conflict and action between creatures lower than God. Although the world as seen through the eye of Christian faith--the divine hierarchy--was at all times understood to be in quiet operation, forming the theological backdrop of the cycle plays, the focus of those plays was on earth. Portrayed was the world of men as seen by men, whose imperfect vision could never fully penetrate the mysteries of the Divine Order. Thus the play world mirrored the fallen world of suffering, conflict, and mutability. As a counterpoint to this mutable world, God represented the true aesthetic--the beautiful, static, perfect reality. As this immutable reality, God was the static force that Joyce seeks in the aesthetic emotion--the ideal source of all beauty. But whereas moderns tend to search uncertainly for this static beauty in an art that serves as both means and end, medieval man was certain of his goal--

⁴²Joyce, p. 205.

God--and employed his art as a means of focusing his thoughts on gaining that highest realm. The art so employed was often--indeed, primarily--didactic, with a resultant kinetic response, a conscious act of will, sought for and even demanded. The goal of the art was to stimulate an effort to seek to become one with the invisible ideal beauty beyond that art--God. The proper movement of the mind was at all times toward God, and proper art was that which facilitated that movement.

In terms of effect, then, medieval drama is proper art by Joyce's definition in that the response it elicited from its medieval audience resulted in the same emotion as does Joyce's proper art--an arresting and raising of the mind above desire and loathing. However, whether that response is active or passive presents an important distinction between these two concepts. Joyce's theory implies an essential passivity of the will. The aesthetic emotion produced by the art results in a raising of the mind to a perception of beauty as something above the emotion itself. Seeking the same perception of beauty, medieval aesthetics demanded an activity of the will. The mind was to focus on art as a symbol for the source of all beauty and was to move, by the use of reason, from the beauty of art to the more sublime beauty of God. Thus, both of these aesthetic concepts have as an ultimate goal the perception of ideal beauty. The real difference lies in the definition of that beauty and whether art is seen as

its source or as the means to a greater source beyond the art itself.

This study is not the place to enter into an in-depth discussion of philosophical aesthetics, or to attempt to prove the intrinsic value or correctness of one set of aesthetic principles over another. The important issue is whether art can appeal effectively to audiences who hold differing aesthetic principles from those under which the art was created. It is an issue which requires, perhaps, less argument than understanding, less intransigence concerning particular aesthetic values than a readiness to accept the value of differing aesthetics.

The distinction between proper and improper art, along with the modern aversion to didactic art in general, then, is crucial to an understanding of the Corpus Christi cycle drama. If that art is proper which fulfills the function for which it was created--the static arresting of the mind and the kinetic movement of raising it to a contemplation of ideal beauty--then the cycle drama is certainly proper art. Its didacticism was precisely its means of arresting the mind (and heart) and of causing the movement toward the ideal beauty. One of the first steps in approaching medieval drama, then, is to come to some understanding of the creative impulses and governing perspectives that produced and accepted such didacticism as a conscious informing aesthetic principle.

Specifically, there remains to be examined the perceived role of art in the life of the Middle Ages and the effects that this role produced in the Corpus Christi drama.

CHAPTER TWO

One of the peculiar characteristics of medieval literature is its fondness for telling stories or presenting information to audiences who in all probability already knew those stories or possessed that information. Commenting on this tendency, C. S. Lewis noted that "one gets the impression that medieval people, like Professor Tolkien's Hobbits, enjoyed books which told them what they already knew."⁴³ Upon reflection, this comment becomes quite significant in relation to the medieval cycle drama. Some critics have pointed to the lack of selectivity necessitated by the need for fidelity to predetermined sources as one of the artistic defects of this drama.⁴⁴ Yet, in terms of medieval aesthetics, the reverse of this criticism holds true. As noted above, the medieval conception of the universal order was static not dynamic. The ultimate source of all beauty lay in an immutable principle (God). The proper response of art and thought was the attempt to mirror, however imperfectly, this static ideal reality. What became important was not so much

⁴³Lewis, p. 200.

⁴⁴Craig, p. 2.

the individual act of creation in and for itself, but the revealing of the one great efficient cause, the source of all creation. The need for individual expression was bound up with--and subordinate to--the need for communal expression.⁴⁵ Thus, literary and artistic expression often became the re-dressing of shared and long-accepted thought. Medieval literature, for the most part, remained anonymous and relied heavily on authorities and tradition to give them substance, form, and credibility. And they were accepted by audiences much less concerned with the inventiveness of the individual author than with the venerability of his subject. Generally, as Professor Johan Huizinga noted in his study of the later Middle Ages, medieval audiences were impressed first by "the dignity and sanctity of the subject," and second by "the astonishing mastery, the perfectly natural rendering of all the details."⁴⁶ In short, medieval art, and especially medieval drama, was a communal experience,⁴⁷ an expression of collective beliefs, ideas, and aspirations. Among the most certain of those beliefs and the highest of those aspirations were those contained in the Christian message of man's

⁴⁵Paul Zumthor, "From the Universal to the Particular in Medieval Poetry," Modern Language Notes, 85 (1970), 816.

⁴⁶Huizinga, p. 264.

⁴⁷Salter, p. 80.

fall and redemption. In the dramatic expression of this message, the Corpus Christi dramatists found the means to appeal to the entire medieval community. Such communal theatre placed the audience in a unique role and reflected an aesthetics of utility in which both instruction and the psychological release found in celebration were crucial elements.

Underlying this rather utilitarian view of art was the distinction made by St. Augustine between those things which should be enjoyed and those things which should be used. "To enjoy something," wrote St. Augustine, "is to cling to it with love for its own sake. To use something, however, is to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love."⁴⁸ If something was enjoyed that should properly be used, it was wasted or abused. So that there would be no misunderstanding as to what may be enjoyed and what only used, Augustine went a step further. The only things which should properly be enjoyed, that is loved for their own sakes, were "the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, a single Trinity."⁴⁹ Love of anything less would certainly be an inferior love. To prevent the shackling effects of such inferior love from obstructing the proper love of God, the things of this world were to be used, not enjoyed for

⁴⁸St. Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, p. 9.

⁴⁹St. Augustine, p. 10.

themselves. Moreover the proper use of the visible, corporal, and temporal things of this world was as the means of comprehending the invisible, spiritual, and eternal things of God.⁵⁰ Thus, beauty, natural or artistic, was beautiful only insofar as it was useful--that is, as it led the mind to an apprehension and contemplation of God. Implicit in this doctrine was a strong didactic element. The creative efforts of the artist, when properly applied, directed the mind and heart toward a truth which was "not only beautiful in itself, but was the source of all other beauty."⁵¹ As long as men perceived art as a vehicle properly used to raise the mind above the art to its ultimate source, they could make use of even more secular themes and subjects as adjuncts to worship.

Informed by this aesthetics of utility, the medieval Corpus Christi drama functioned within the social context of the later Middle Ages in two very important ways. First, in its association with the festival itself this drama represented an important diversion from the rather pessimistic tenor of life. Second, the cycle drama represented a culminating effort to revitalize a religion growing increasingly sterile.

The festivals, such as that of Corpus Christi, with which the cycle drama was associated, fulfilled an extremely

⁵⁰St. Augustine, p. 10.

⁵¹Robertson, p. 67.

important function in Medieval society. Indeed, Professor Huizinga noted that as the "supreme expression of their culture," these festivals represented the "highest mode of collective enjoyment and an assertion of solidarity."⁵² The holiday spirit of the festivals created enjoyable diversions from the rather harsh conditions of medieval life for all segments of the society and provided both form and substance to that spirit of communal celebration which was itself an important aspect of medieval thought. Especially in their association with the towns and the middle class did these events manifest a sense of social solidarity and economic well-being. The festivals were often quite elaborate celebrations. Their religious origins detracted little from their more secular extravagance. Even a cursory glance at the guild or city corporation records of York, for example, indicates from the money collected and spent for these events that they were indeed economically and socially important occasions.⁵³ Martin Stevens described the Corpus Christi Day performances as festive, joyous, even riotous events to which medieval audiences came in a "holiday mood, hence to be entertained."⁵⁴ We may perhaps estimate the value of these

⁵²Huizinga, p. 250.

⁵³James F. Hoy, "Records of Dramatic Activity in Medieval York," Dissertation University of Missouri, 1970, passim.

⁵⁴Martin Stevens, "Illusion and Reality in Medieval Drama," College English, 32 (1972), 454.

festivals as enjoyable diversions by noting that, in a 14th Century list that also included being bled by a doctor, warming one's self by a fire, and watching the snow fall, attending Church festivals was listed as one of the primary pleasures of a feudal nobleman.⁵⁵

But the festivals of the Middle Ages performed a more significant psychological function as well. This function, described by Professor Huizinga, had a direct bearing on the art of the period:

. . .the more crushing the misery of daily life, the stronger the stimulants that will be needed to produce that intoxication with beauty and delight without which life would be unbearable. The 15th Century, profoundly pessimistic, a prey to continual depression, could not forgo the emphatic affirmation afforded by these splendid and solemn collective rejoicingsAll literary, musical, and artistic enjoyment was more or less closely connected with festivals.⁵⁶

Festivals, then, not only provided pleasant diversions but met a vitally important social and psychological need of medieval society and functioned as the impetus for the development of other forms of artistic expression.

The drama, though not born from the festival, was certainly a further manifestation of that same collective, communal need for diversion and celebration. And the drama also was linked to a more subtle and profound type diversion--that found in the medieval ideal of the sublime life, an

⁵⁵Artz, p. 323.

⁵⁶Huizinga, p. 37.

ideal inherently bound up with Christianity. One of the means of denying the often severe realities of this life is a strong belief in the possibility of a better life to come. Such a belief presents itself to the minds of men at all times, but, generally, the more depressing the present life, the more vigorously will men adhere to this belief.⁵⁷ For the men of the Middle Ages, the most accessible pathway to this ideal life lay through the Church.

The Church, of course, very early became the most dominant single institution in the Middle Ages and remained so throughout the period. Its power and presence were clearly evident in matters both ecclesiastical and secular. But, though the Church as an institution remained fairly strong, Christianity itself exhibited a growing loss of vitality. Excerpts from medieval Church documents indicate this loss by their complaints of illiteracy in the clergy, the decay of monasticism, the failure of the people to attend Mass, and their call for more forceful and active preaching.⁵⁸ Part of this loss was undoubtedly attributable to the propensity of human institutions toward corruption, from which the Church was not exempt. But much of this growing sterility in the

⁵⁷Huizinga, p. 37.

⁵⁸G. G. Coulton, Life in the Middle Ages, see esp. Ch. 4.

religious faith itself was the result of a sort of natural deterioration. Primitive religions enabled their practitioners to experience sensuously and tangibly, if not their gods, then certainly the natural occurrences in which the gods were manifest (i.e. Phoebus was the sun, Poseidon the sea, Aeolus the winds, etc.). Even though the early Christians were one step removed from such experience, they, too were able to perceive mystically during the Mass the Real Presence of their God. The early Church rituals retained the vitality and efficacy needed to provide the intense psychic release that is the essence of religious experience, and thus made that experience real. However, as Christianity grew more temporally distant from the events which gave it life, and the inner flame, as it were, grew more dim, the Church's attempts at revitalization resulted in an increasingly elaborate liturgy, architecture, and iconography. The role of art in these attempts became increasingly important, according to Professor Wickham.

To early Christians the Real Presence was something allowed for in the architecture of God's house. . . .Naves of Churches grew longer, but still the Real Presence lingered in the sanctuary for the eye of faith to see. . . .As the time span between Christ of the Gospels and the business of daily living lengthened, so this Presence became less distinct, less tangible, geographically more remote. All the while, the determination to preserve it grew. Art, ever more in antiphon and trope, in fresco and stained glass, in stone and alabaster, was called on to preserve it, until, in drama, the last step was taken and the Presence revealed to believers through

Man himself, breathing, walking, talking, and living again the sacred story.⁵⁹

The cycle dramas, then, in one sense, represent the culmination of a long series of attempts to revitalize the Christian religion itself. Significantly, these cycles flourished for nearly 200 years before succumbing to the fatal impact of the next major attempt to revitalize the Church--the Protestant Reformation.

The periodic attempts to deny the pessimism and violence of life through festival and the ever increasing attempts to revitalize the religious faith through the arts formed two crucial aspects of the medieval social context. The aesthetics they fostered on the basis of which medieval art was both created and appreciated was an expression of communal and devotional creative impulses. In the Middle Ages, however, no formal theory of aesthetics existed.⁶⁰ But a lack of formal aesthetic theory does not necessarily mean a lack of aesthetic practice. For art in those times was created and enjoyed as an important part of life itself. Professor Huizinga, noting that medieval art, generally was not desired for its own sake, described the role of art in the Middle Ages as one of decorating life and of expressing "life's significance."⁶¹ To be so enjoyed, the art needed no

⁵⁹Wickham, pp. 311-12.

⁶⁰Huizinga, p. 264.

⁶¹Huizinga, p. 244.

formal aesthetic theory or organized body of criticism. A common set of experiences and ideals linked the creation of the artist to the appreciation of the audience. Such communally derived aesthetic expectations were particularly important in relation to the Corpus Christi drama. As Professor Wickham first contended, the Corpus Christi feast and the Corpus Christi drama resulted from the same communal impulses and aimed at similar ends--to revitalize religion by infusing the significance of sacred history into the secular surroundings of daily existence.⁶² The importance for modern readers of this relationship between Corpus Christi feast and drama is to recognize, in Wickham's words, "the deliberate challenge that was issued to a secular world by the injection into it of a sacred drama, which far from taking acceptance for granted, assaulted the emotions with sufficient intensity to cause an explosion in the imagination: an explosion that would result in perception of the path to salvation prepared by divine grace."⁶³

It is important, then, to recognize that the Corpus Christi drama was certainly functional on several levels in

⁶²Wickham, p. 313. See also Jerome Taylor, "Dramatic Structure of the Corpus Christi, or 'Cycle', Plays," in Medieval English Drama, eds. Jerome Taylor and Alan Nelson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 153.

⁶³Wickham, p. 314.

medieval society, and that the governing aesthetics of the drama included a strong didactic element. This didacticism was deliberate and conscious. That medieval man recognized and accepted such didacticism as one of the informing principles of the drama is made evident by the arguments advanced in the Middle Ages in defense of the plays. Although no complete apology survives,⁶⁴ the famous Lollard sermon against the miracle plays provides a summary of what was probably the most prevalent of the arguments defending the plays. In order to refute them, the writer of the sermon advanced six arguments in defense of the plays:

1. The plays are performed in the worship of God.
2. The plays turned men to faith and virtue by instructing them in the folly of pride and in the treacherous ways the devil attempts to make men his servants.
3. The plays often moved men to compassion and devotion by portraying the great sufferings of Christ.
4. Some men could be converted to God only by "games and play."
5. Since men must have some recreation, the plays were better, or "less evil," than many other pastimes.
6. Since it was acceptable to have the "miracles of God" portrayed in art, it was also acceptable to have them represented in drama; especially since the drama was even more effective than paintings

⁶⁴Woolf, p. 85.

or sculpture as the drama was a "quick bok" and the other a "dead one."⁶⁵

Although all of these arguments are informative and offer some insight into medieval attitudes toward the drama, three of the arguments, those numbered 2, 3, and 6, are especially worth noting. Arguments two and three are related and indicate two of the primary functions of medieval art in general and the Corpus Christi drama in particular--to instruct and to move its audience. The sixth argument added the weight of authority to the defense of the drama and specifically emphasized the drama's unique capabilities for successfully performing those two functions noted above. It was customary in the Middle Ages to appeal to traditional authorities for support of one's arguments. The drama, however, was still relatively recent enough to have no such traditional defense. But Church authorities had traditionally accepted and defended the use of images in painting and sculpture on at least three grounds: "images recalled what they represented to the memory; they moved the beholder to compassion and compunction more effectively than what was heard or read; they were books for the unlettered."⁶⁶ By linking the drama to other types of images, the defenders of the drama at one stroke were able to

⁶⁵"A Sermon Against Miracle Plays," first printed in Reliquiae Antiquae II 45, taken from Coulton, pp. 191-96.

⁶⁶Woolf, p. 90.

enlist in support of the drama this established tradition of ecclesiastical authority in defense of images. Furthermore, they were able to go this defense one better. They could argue not only that the drama should be accepted on the same ground as images but, that because the drama combined both the verbal and the visual, it was even more effective than mere images.

By recognizing that the medieval perspective toward art was one of utility and that art became a functionally important part of life, modern readers have a referent context from which to approach Corpus Christi drama. Specifically, the drama functioned in several aspects of medieval life: as an indicator of social solidarity and economic vitality; as a means of psychological release; and, most importantly, as an aid to religious worship. Its role included instruction as well as entertainment. Or, more precisely, the drama created from both these elements an experience that made the Christian message of redemption comprehensible to its audience while producing a transcendent effect moving enough to bring audiences back year after year. The effectiveness and longevity of the drama depended upon its ability to reflect, yet transcend, the governing aesthetics of the period and to meet successfully the demands of the audiences' expectations, while molding those expectations into an experience that remained fresh and vital for 200 years.

Such molding must be subtle. Too great an innovation and the dramatist would have faced, as did Wordsworth 400 years later, the task of having to create the taste by which his work was to be appreciated.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, an audience, confronted with such work often requires some time, some aesthetic distancing, before it can fully appreciate the artist's work. The medieval playwrights, very concerned with the acceptance of their work by its audience, did not have time for such distancing. The drama was communal. Its purpose was to give expression to collective beliefs, concerns, and ideals. Its mandate was to speak to its contemporary audience with a voice and a message clearly heard and clearly understood. The Christian message of the means to man's salvation must be made intelligible and relevant to each particular member of the audience. This task was of primary importance to the Corpus Christi dramatist. As Professor Stevens noted, "The Corpus Christi drama worked in its time because it managed to bring the whole of spiritual history into the context of its own world."⁶⁸

This task was facilitated to a large degree by the homogeneity of thought and the adherence to a shared and accepted tradition noted earlier which characterized the medieval

⁶⁷Thomas Hutchinson, ed., Wordsworth: Poetical Works, p. 70.

⁶⁸Stevens, p. 453.

mind set. Specifically, medieval aesthetics were firmly rooted in the medieval concept of Realism.⁶⁹ Realism in the Middle Ages was what modern philosophy calls Platonic Idealism. It was the belief in the ultimate reality of the Ideal Form-- in Christian terms, the immutable Supreme God. Such realism produced as one of the most characteristic elements of the later medieval spirit the attempt to find concrete, tangible forms for almost every abstract conception and idea. This characteristic was especially apparent in the religious aspect of society: "The religious emotion always tended to be transmuted into images. Mystery seemed to become graspable by the mind when invested with perceptible form. The need for adoring the ineffable in visible shapes was continually creating ever new figures."⁷⁰ For the cycle plays to mirror reality, then, the concern for the dramatist, in medieval terms, was not verisimilitude in the modern sense, but was the mirroring of the Immutable Principle by revealing God's Hand through the panoramic scope of Christian history.

Because ultimate reality was God, from whom all things derived their nature and meaning, and because man's imperfection prevented him from total knowledge of that reality, the medieval concern became one of finding modes of expression that would render the unknowable Divine into comprehensible,

⁶⁹Huizinga, p. 204.

⁷⁰Huizinga, p. 200.

however imperfect, human terms. To do so, medieval thinkers sought to personify ideas, to find the divine principle in a vast array of symbolic relationships, and to emphasize the contrast between the mortal and naturalistic elements of life and the immutable ideal of reality. These three techniques, firmly rooted in tradition, were the means by which the great Christian mysteries could be made intelligible and relevant through art. Works such as Emile Mâle's classic study of religious art in France during the Middle Ages have examined the effects of these techniques in the painting, sculpture, and stained glass of the cathedrals.⁷¹ And studies of the relationship between these art forms and the drama⁷² reveal a correspondence substantial enough that Professor Woolf suggested that one way of viewing the drama is as talking pictures.⁷³ It should be expected, then, that these three techniques--personification, symbolism, and naturalism--greatly informed the Corpus Christi drama. It now remains to examine the particular effects these techniques had on the Corpus Christi drama in an attempt to determine to at least some degree the ways in which that drama was made effective to its medieval audience.

⁷¹Emile Mâle, The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century, trans. Dora Nussey.

⁷²Mary D. Anderson, Drama and Imagery in Medieval English Churches. See also Woolf, Ch. 5.

⁷³Woolf, p. 101.

CHAPTER THREE

The first of these concepts to be considered, personification, is, perhaps, the most superficial. It has the advantage, however, of being the most recognizable. The purpose of personification is to give a comprehensible shape to concepts or occurrences otherwise incomprehensible. The most comprehensible shape in most cases is human. The idealism of the Middle Ages tended to lean toward anthropomorphism in its attempts to interpret the unknown. Once an idea had been given a real existence, the medieval mind wished to see the idea alive.⁷⁴ But such a living existence was possible only through personification. The widespread use of personification was evident in both the literature of the period and the visual arts of painting, sculpture, etc.⁷⁵

The most complete and developed form of personification was allegory, a technique that reached its highest achievement in the medieval morality plays. The technique of allegory, however, was operative in medieval cycle drama as well. In its most recognized sense, personification invested with

⁷⁴Huizinga, p. 205.

⁷⁵Mâle, passim. See also Huizinga, ch. 15; and Anderson, ch. 4.

human form the many abstract, supernatural beings who appeared on the Corpus Christi stage. In a more restricted sense, the use of personification influenced the characterization of those Biblical figures who, though long dead, had had a real, historical existence. Influenced by the Neo-Platonic Idealism of the Middle Ages, the medieval dramatist was probably not as concerned with the distinctions between these two uses of personification as would be a modern critic. For although the dramatists were undoubtedly aware of the spiritual and ethereal nature of God, Satan, angels, and demons, these supernatural beings were as real as any of those figures with historical existence. As a result, the techniques of personification and characterization were closely related. Indeed, in one sense, the entire cycle was an attempt to personify the Biblical characters and message by bringing those characters to life on the stage to re-enact the Christian story.

The drama implicitly defined each of these characters in terms of his relationship to God--personifying in the most general sense either good or evil.⁷⁶ Those characters defined as good, Abel, Abraham, Noah, and even the more abstract good souls of the Judgement play, for example, were ultimately personifications of those qualities manifested through the selfless love of God: order, obedience, charity. Those defined as evil personified the qualities of an improper,

⁷⁶Kolve, p. 207.

perverted love of self: discord, disobedience, selfishness. The consistency of their actions and responses indicated that these characters were to be viewed as personifications of either good or evil and not the mixture of both that modern criticism expects in a true-to-life, "rounded" character. Each good character in some way performs an act of obedience or charity--whether it be Abel's obedience in tithing, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God's command, Noah or Moses overcoming initial self-doubts to obey his God, or the less definite acts of charity performed by the good souls and recounted in the Judgement plays. Conversely, from Cain's first act of disobedience and murder to Pharaoh's deceit of Moses to Herod's tyrannical raging and plotting to Pilate's sly maneuvering in the trial scenes to the indefinite acts of malice and selfishness attributed to the evil souls in the Judgement pageants, the satanic figures consistently display rancor, violence, disloyalty, and self-interest. The Corpus Christi drama undertook to personify absolute good and absolute evil through the characterization of the stage personae.⁷⁷

The ultimate challenge was the two polar figures from which these emanated--God and Satan. These two figures, whose conflict permeates the entire cycle, provided a unity of

⁷⁷Stevens, p. 453.

theme and action throughout the plays, beginning with Satan's first act of pride and disobedience and ending with the final triumph of God in the final reinstatement of the proper hierarchy at the last Judgement.⁷⁸ God was characterized as eternal, omnipotent, and omnipresent, His only motive for the Creation was love:

For this skille made y you this daye,
My name to worschippe ay where;
Lovis me for-thy and loues me aye
For my makyng, I aske no more.⁷⁹

Satan, though not omnipotent, was also eternal and ubiquitous. His power, if less than that of God, was yet immense; and, driven by revenge and envy, he aimed all of his malice at man. On one level, then, these two figures were two mighty forces locked in a conflict of cosmic proportions in which man figured as both pawn and objective.⁸⁰

But there resulted another effect of personification-- that of humanizing these great forces. In York pageant V, for example, it is probable that the inherent contradiction of portraying an immutable, perfect Being through an imperfect human actor did not trouble the medieval audience and that they were able to recognize in God, the Father, a particularly

⁷⁸James Young, p. 330.

⁷⁹The York Plays, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith, p. 16. Further references to the York Cycle will be noted in the text.

⁸⁰James Young, p. 332.

human element of sadness at Adam and Eve's disobedience, and interpret in human terms His willingness to vent most of his anger on the worm. The same humanizing effect appeared in the Chester Creation in what was almost a lament at Satan's disobedience:

A, wicked pryde! A, woo worth thee, woo!
 My meirth thou hast made amisse.
 I maye well suffer: my will is not soe
 that they shoulde parte this from my blesse.
 A, pryde! Why mighte thou not braste in two?
 Why did the that? Why did they thus?
 Behoulde, my angelles, pride is your foe.
 All sorrowe shall shewe wheresoever yt is.⁸¹

Here is almost recognizable the self-doubt and pain of a saddened parent whose child has hurt him so deeply that reconciliation is impossible.

The personification of Satan had a similar humanizing effect. And this effect served to reduce the stature of Satan to the more comprehensible level of a vengeful, deceitful human. Satan's literal fall in the York Barkers' play, his cowardly temptation of Eve, his ability to be deceived about Christ's identity, the lack of respect shown to him by his attendant demons, and his defeat during the Harrowing of Hell, all combine to form an almost comic contrast to the humanized yet majestic dignity of God. The extent to which a particular actor's rendering of this role--his facial expressions, gestures, voice intonation, etc.--may have enhanced

⁸¹The Chester Mystery Cycle, eds. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, p. 10.

this comic effect must remain a matter of speculation, but the role certainly seems open to comic, along with serious, interpretation.

The major defect of personification is precisely this tendency to reduce. The force of the original concept or idea may be lost in the characterization. In such cases familiarity may breed a certain amount of indifference, if not irreverence (witness, for example, the rather comic portrayal in the York cycle of an old, grumbling, credulous Joseph who was, after all, a supposedly venerated Saint). Personification and allegory, then, except as used in the closely related technique of characterization, were not entirely suited to the purposes of the Corpus Christi drama; as a result, their effects are less apparent than those of the next two concepts. Symbolism, on the other hand, involves a more complex mental engagement and consequently produces a more profound expression. Where allegory shapes a concept into visible form, symbolism seeks to find relationships between concepts. Symbolism was, therefore, a much more effective mode of expression for the Corpus Christi dramatist than was allegory.

By the later Middle Ages, the use of symbolism pervaded medieval society. The function of symbolism, as that of personification, was to interpret the unknown through the known. Since for the medieval idealist all things derived from God and His presence was in all things, it seems that

all one had to do was look until he perceived that Presence. This mode of thought provided literally a world of symbols. By the 14th and 15th centuries, this habit of mind had led to the development of some extreme fine, at times almost ludicrous, systems of symbolic associations. Numbers, for example, held great symbolic meaning. The system of numerology eventually advanced to such a degree that, given a little time, the medieval symbolist could find symbolic significance in almost any number--provided he was allowed to add, subtract, and multiply. An example cited by Mâle illustrates this method:

From St. Augustine onwards all theologians interpreted the meaning of the number 12 after the same fashion. Twelve is the number of the universal Church, and it was for profound reasons that Jesus willed the number of His apostles should be twelve. Now twelve is the product of three by four. Three, which is the number of the Trinity and by consequence of the soul made in the image of the Trinity, connotes all spiritual things. Four, the number of the elements, is the symbol of material things--the body and the world--which result from combinations of the four elements. To multiply three by four is in the mystic sense to infuse matter with spirit, to proclaim the truths of the faith to the world, to establish the universal Church of which the apostles are the symbol.⁸²

In a natural world pervaded by the Divine Essence, nothing was too small or too humble to symbolize that Divine Essence. Hence, a walnut symbolized Christ: the kernel was His Divine nature, the outer peel His mortal humanity, and

⁸²Mâle, p. 11.

the wooden shell the Cross.⁸³ Symbolism as a habit of mind and as a mode of expression influenced practically every aspect of medieval society. Through paintings, sculpture, music and architecture; through more secular activities such as tournaments and royal entries; through the stylized conventions of love; through the heraldry of the nobility and guilds; through the sermons of medieval preachers; this mode of thought filtered through all levels of society. Medieval man in general learned to interpret his world through the symbolism of the Church and its art. The significance of this interpretation, noted Mâle, was the "scorn for things of sense, and the profound conviction that reaching out to the immaterial through the material man may have fleeting visions of God."⁸⁴

The importance of this symbolic mode for medieval drama was that both dramatist and audience shared a mental set that fully accepted symbolism. By the later Middle Ages, an established tradition of symbolic thought provided the dramatist with a technique of expression with which he could appeal to every social level of the audience. It may be assumed, then, that many of the limitations to dramatic effectiveness seen in modern terms may not have been limitations

⁸³Huizinga, p. 206.

⁸⁴Mâle, p. 20.

to a medieval audience, who would understand and accept symbolic props, actions, costumes, and characters. The Chester cycle represented the animals entering the Ark by painted pictures; the Coventry Drapers paid to have made "three worlds" which were evidently burned as symbols for the destruction of the world at the Last Judgement;⁸⁵ the York Doomsday pageant represented devils with grotesque two-faced masks and portrayed several angels through the use of puppets or paintings;⁸⁶ although the precise method of staging the particular cycles has not been completely determined,⁸⁷ all of the cycles shared a similar station-and-place technique of staging, which implicitly demanded symbolic journeys and stylized props; and the multileveled stage required in many of the plays would again require symbolic representations of Heaven, Hell, and Earth. Working within the established tradition of symbolic interpretation, the dramatists appealed to audiences whose aesthetic or dramatic sensibilities would not be offended by the use of such stylized mountains, cities, and forests, or painted stars, angels, and animals, but who

⁸⁵Arnold Williams, The Drama of Medieval England, p. 102.

⁸⁶Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Dorrell, "The Doomsday Pageant of the York Mercers, 1433," Leeds Studies in English, n.s. 5 (1971), 29-34.

⁸⁷James F. Hoy, "A Modern Analogue to Medieval Staging," Journal of American Folklore, 90 (1977), 182-83.

accepted these as living symbols for the reality they represented. The dramatists appealed to audiences who could perceive the symbolic significance in the flowering of Joseph's rod, the gifts of the Magi and shepherds, the color imagery, symbolic music, symbolic costuming, and the rather specialized system of typology.

This last-mentioned form of symbolism, typology, is of major importance. It is unique in that, through typology, symbolism and personification (characterization) meet and blend into a system that many critics see as one of the major organizational principles of medieval Corpus Christi drama.⁸⁸ Typology, as defined by Walter Meyers in his study of the Wakefield plays, is

. . .the system of Scriptural exegesis that has its name from the fact that it is based on the figurative or typical relation of Biblical persons, or objects, or events, to a new truth. A type is a person, thing, or action, having its own independent and absolute existence, but at the same time intended by God to prefigure a future person, thing, or action, which person, etc., is the antitype. This method of exegesis is to be distinguished from allegory, since both type and antitype have a genuine historical existence.⁸⁹

As a method of Biblical exegesis typology served to find patterns of consistency and teleological significance in the

⁸⁸Walter F. Meyers, A Figure Given: Typology in the Wakefield Plays, passim. This study offers a complete discussion of typology in the cycle drama.

⁸⁹Meyers, p. 8.

revealed framework of human history--patterns which revealed the workings of God's divine plan for man's salvation. Its use in the cycle dramas points again to the overall design of the plays--to express that plan in intelligible and comprehensible terms to the medieval audience. It is quite probable, as Kolve asserted, that this figurative use of historical events and characters determined to a large degree the selection of scenes and characters to be represented in the cycles.⁹⁰

The major types were of two groups--manifesting again the medieval tendency to categorize the world according to a good/evil dichotomy. The good men, as essentially types of Christ, took on added dimensions of meaning as the nuclei for various clusters of symbolic associations formed around them. Adam, for example, was the first and often most significant type of Christ. Mâle described in this way the various symbolic associations which linked the first Adam with Christ, the second Adam,

The first Adam was formed on the sixth day, and the second Adam was incarnate in the sixth age of the world. Even as the one ruined man by his sin so the other saved man by His death, and in dying restored him once more to the image of God. One can readily understand why the Middle Ages so often placed Adam at the foot of the Cross, and why too they imagined that the tree of the Garden of Eden, miraculously preserved through the centuries, provided the wood of which it was made.⁹¹

⁹⁰Kolve, p. 97.

⁹¹Mâle, p. 153.

Abel symbolized Christ both in his death as a figure of the Crucifixion and in his life as a shepherd whose offering of the lamb prefigured the eucharistic sacrifice.⁹² Noah as the only just man before the Flood was typologically representative of Christ the ultimate just man, and the Ark prefigured both the Cross and the Church.⁹³ The significance of the Abraham-Isaac episode as a type for the crucifixion was one of the most obvious of these figural relationships. Finally, Moses prefigured Christ both as the giver of the Old Law, which Christ superseded with the New Law,⁹⁴ and as the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt, as Christ led the patriarchs from Limbo.⁹⁵ All of these figures had their fulfillment in Christ.

Those characters who were representative of evil also displayed the influence of typology. But, whereas the development of the types of Christ followed an inductive method, with the specific types leading up to and finding fulfillment in the ultimate source of all good, the development of the evil typology was more deductive. Satan, the generalization, if you will, of evil was characterized first and subsequent specific manifestations of the evil principle followed in

⁹²Woolf, p. 124.

⁹³Mâle, p. 154.

⁹⁴Mâle, p. 156.

⁹⁵Woolf, p. 153.

Cain, Pharoah, Herod, and Pilate. The consistency of their tyrannical actions and the emphasis on their inordinate pride and disobedience linked all of these characters as types of evil. In the Towneley cycle, this satanic typology was most fully developed. Meyers, in his study of the typology of this cycle, saw Pilate as a figure of "consummate depravity, a foil for Jesus."⁹⁶ As Christ was the antitype for the good men of Christian history, Pilate was the antitype for the evil men: " . . . [the] verbal similarities and sinful congruences are present in the speeches of all the tyrants to emphasize their unity in sin, following their archetype, Lucifer, as dwellers of the proud city, culminating in Pilate."⁹⁷ This satanic typology contrasted with the Old Testament types of Christ. Such contrast of good and evil types reinforces the thematic and dramatic unity begun in the initial fall-of-Lucifer plays.

The use of this rather elaborate and traditionally sanctioned system of symbolism added to the significance of many scenes and characters. Uxor in the plays of the Flood, for example, was an effectively used stock character in whom the audience could recognize the conventional theme of the shrewish wife and marital conflict.⁹⁸ Her refusal to enter

⁹⁶Meyers, p. 43.

⁹⁷Meyers, p. 47.

⁹⁸Williams, p. 121.

the Ark and her antics in argument with Noah provided burlesque humor and injected lively action into a necessarily very stylized and symbolic play. But she also symbolized the effects of the Fall. Her disobedience paralleled Eve's disobedience and, by way of contrast, looked forward to the obedience of the Virgin Mary. Uxor's boisterous, recalcitrant behavior represented the post-lapsarian discord and perversion of proper hierarchical relationships. Her sudden reversal once she entered the Ark symbolized the reestablishment of the proper order through the Church.

Another symbol of the Church expanded the meaning of the final Crucifixion scenes. The enacting of the legend of the blind centurion Longinus who, after piercing Christ's side with a lance, had his sight restored by Christ's blood, not only added another act of cruelty to the suffering of Christ in the Passion, but was often interpreted symbolically as Mâle described:

The Roman centurion, who after piercing the right side of Jesus with his lance, recognized that he was indeed the Son of God and loudly proclaimed his belief, stands for the new Church. He is there to teach men that on that day the faith passed from the blind Jews to the Gentiles who recover their sight. The man with the sponge, whom tradition has always reputed to be a Jew, is the Synagogue, and the vinegar with which he filled the sponge is the old and now unsound doctrine.⁹⁹

This symbolism added greater significance to Christ's refusal

⁹⁹Mâle, p. 190.

to drink the vinegar (symbolic refusal to accept the Old Law) in the York version: "Thy drinke it schalle do me no deere/
Wete thou wele ther-of wille I none" (York, 36, ll. 248-49).

Another effect of symbolism was to enhance the dramatic effectiveness of the cycles by aiding the dramatists in making the plays personally relevant to each individual. Adam, for example, personified a historical character and was allegorically representative of Everyman--his fall was every man's fall. In the York Armourers' pageant, Adam received from the Angel an implement with which to till the soil, presumably a plow or a shovel (York, 6, ll. 58-60); and, as he exits at the close of the play, Adam takes up a tree as a sign of his shame (York, 6, ll. 165-66). These symbols of toil (the plow) and of subjection (the tree) were comprehensible forms of the hardships faced daily by the medieval spectator. Yet the tree was also a symbol of the cross and identified Adam as a type, a prefiguration of Christ. Through symbolic association Adam's sin could be understood both in its cosmic relevance and in its relevance to each particular individual in the audience, who was reminded at once of his personal implication in sin and his need for salvation, and of the divine plan that made such redemption possible. Of course, the degree to which any one particular member of a medieval audience would have understood all of the various levels of symbolic meaning in a cycle must be left to speculation. But, given the per-

vasiveness of this habit of mind and mode of expression in the Middle Ages, it is quite probable that a majority of the audience would have possessed the ability to interpret correctly much of this symbolism.

Symbolism, however, while aiding the communication between dramatist and audience, was also somewhat restrictive. Even though the audience would have a conditioned habit of mind to accept symbolic expression, the nature of the particular symbols would have to be geared toward the audience's capacity to grasp the relationships. The dramatist would have had to draw his symbols from pre-conceived systems with which the audience would have been familiar or from the day-to-day life of the audience--resulting in the use of topical costuming, local allusions, and conscious anachronisms, for example. But by the later Middle Ages the very pervasiveness of the symbolic mode itself was exhausting its efficacy. Even at its simplest, a symbol is essentially an intellectual device. The unknown is interpreted in terms of its relationship to the known, but the connecting relationship itself is held in the mind. By the 15th Century, symbolism had become little more than an intellectual pastime, an amusement often based on rather tenuous associations and frivolous repetitions.¹⁰⁰ But the Corpus Christi dramatist did not care only

¹⁰⁰Huizinga, p. 208.

to show off his own mental dexterity in forming or repeating such associations. He sought to engage his audience in an emotionally charged dramatic experience as well. To create such emotional appeals, the dramatists made use of the third dominant mode of expression, naturalism,¹⁰¹ which was more physical, more visual, and more emotionally effective than was symbolism. Within the parameters defined by subject, theme, and symbol, this naturalism provided the greatest opportunity for dramatic development.

The growth of medieval religious emotion paralleled the growth of the Church.¹⁰² The early Church fathers were concerned with establishing and defending doctrine and ecclesiastical organization. This effort was, for the most part, intellectual. As the centuries passed, during which its doctrines became formalized and its organization institutionalized, patristic Christianity became invested with a growing emotionalism. This emotionalism was partly a result of the preaching of Franciscan friars, whose novel message accented

¹⁰¹The use of the term naturalism here is intended to draw a distinction between the philosophical Realism of the Middle Ages and realism as a modern literary technique. In many ways the medieval naturalistic technique and the modern realistic technique are similar. The major difference between the two is in total purpose--medieval realism as a dramatic device was one means to dramatic effectiveness; it was not an end in itself.

¹⁰²Henry Osborn Taylor, The Medieval Mind, vol. I. See esp. ch. 15.

the suffering and humanity of Christ in the attempt to produce in their audience a "direct acquaintance with" these events.¹⁰³ This emotionalism was also partly a natural result of the development of the medieval mind, with its tendency to crystallize almost all abstract concepts and thought into precise images.¹⁰⁴ This emotionalizing and humanizing influence led to a growing emphasis on the carnal and mortal aspects of life. Professor Huizinga identified this growing emotionalism as "a sort of pathetic naturalism," the roots of which extended back to the mysticism of St. Bernard in the 12th Century. The result of this influence, in Huizinga's words, was the "rapture of a new and overflowing piety [in which] people tried to share the sufferings of Christ by the aid of the imagination."¹⁰⁵ By the 14th and 15th centuries, the emphasis on naturalistic details had become a dominant influence in medieval society. In painting and sculpture, in architecture, in sermons, in literature, and especially in the drama, the emphasis began to concentrate on the physical, even the

¹⁰³Quoted words from George Boas' introduction to his translation of St. Bonaventure's The Mind's Road to God (New York; 1953), p. xviii, taken from Clifford Davidson, "The Realism of the York Realist and the York Passion," Speculum, 50 (1975), 275.

¹⁰⁴Huizinga, p. 264.

¹⁰⁵Huizinga, p. 263.

grotesque. The art of the period often seemed a commentary on the Biblical line "Jesus wept."¹⁰⁶ Details of Christ's humanity, of his agony and suffering, of the pathetic suffering of the Virgin Mary, and of the subsequent martyrdom of the Saints were continually dominant themes. Typical was a painting of the Crucifixion from about 1360, described by Eleanor Prosser:

The twisted bodies of the two thieves are knotted about the crossbar, their bones obviously shattered. The mouths agape in death. Blood drips from ugly slashes--but we can see that the corpses are almost drained, for the flesh is becoming sickeningly gray. Christ's arms are taut, wracked, but the body sags. Blood spurts from his wounds, trickles down the rough wood. At the left are the mourners; on the right, the bestial crowd with their leering, gawking faces. The Mystery plays are a counterpart of this late Gothic art with its unflinching realism.¹⁰⁷

During the same period, grotesque and terrifying descriptions of death (the Dance of Death theme became quite prevalent during the later Middle Ages), of the torments of Hell with its monstrous Hell-Mouth, of Doomsday, appeared in a variety of expressive forms. In the drama this influence resulted in the conscious use of naturalistic detail and in the elaborate use of spectacle, itself a special and exaggerated form of realism especially in the medieval sense of that word. To the medieval mind, angels, demons, Hell-Mouth, Doomsday, were as

¹⁰⁶ Artz, p. 400.

¹⁰⁷ Prosser, p. 13.

real as anything in the observable world. When these were spectacularly represented in art and drama, with obvious careful attention given to even the smallest detail, they effectively satisfied the medieval sense of realism.

Following these naturalistic influences, the Corpus Christi dramatists combined realistic detail with additional symbolic representation to produce conscious and effective emotional responses. Although the effects of this combination are apparent in all of the extant cycles, it is perhaps in the pageants of the York cycle that this naturalism was most effective.¹⁰⁸ The concern for realistic effects allowed for, even demanded, dramatic expansion. Professor Robinson described this dramatic expansion in the York cycle as being "closely connected to the dramatic concerns of character and atmosphere," with the emphasis centering on "processes of behavior" and "processes of thought."¹⁰⁹ As examples of the of the York Realist's attention to realistic human processes of thought and action, Robinson noted such instances as Herod's concern that his shirt be stylish (York, 31, ll. 76-77), or the concern of the servant over the temperature of the water in which Pilate was to wash his hands (York, 33, ll. 42-43).

¹⁰⁸For a discussion of the technique in the York Cycle, see Robinson, "Art of the York Realist," pp. 230-44 and Clifford Davidson, "York Realist," pp. 270-83.

¹⁰⁹Robinson, p. 235.

The porter's reluctance in pageant XXVI to admit Judas into Pilate's Hall--because Judas' looks were so grim that he must be up to "wikkid werk," and because the porter quite naturally would not want to disturb his masters without good cause (York, 26, ll. 155-190)--presented another example of natural mental processes and provided an expansion of the scene that both heightened dramatic tension and made clear Judas' role as betrayer. Still another example was Adam and Eve's exchange, in pageant VI, of a series of accusations, each blaming the other for their fall from Paradise. While this exchange was symbolic of discord, which had been unknown before, it also presented a particularly realistic human touch. The entire series was a dramatic expansion of the Genesis story that makes no mention of any such argument. The major appeal of this play, however, was symbolic. The final effect of the pageant was to symbolize each man's general and personal involvement in disobedience and sin. The effects of naturalism and spectacle were much more apparent in the York plays of the Crucifixion (XXXV) and the Last Judgement (XLVIII).

One indication of the dramatic effectiveness of this naturalistic influence is in the structure of the cycles. In Christian theology, the Nativity and the Resurrection form the two central episodes of Christian history. Both of these events emphasize the miraculous nature of Christ's Divinity. But in the cycle drama, the climactic center came with the

Passion sequence. And these plays emphasize dramatically and realistically Christ's human and mortal nature. Where earlier plays in the cycle often telescoped time to cover thousands of years (sometimes, as in the Noah play, spanning hundreds of years in a single play), the events of Christ's Passion slow time, taking up 10 plays and nearly 4100 lines in the York cycle to cover approximately a two-day period. Such concentration enabled the dramatist to build dramatic and emotional intensity by expansion of the realistic details of Christ's physical suffering. The Trial plays, in particular, presented ample opportunity for the development of villainous characters and for ironic contrast of human law with divine law. The concentration on the actions and character development of Christ's enemies (Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas, Annas) was itself an effect of realism. Although the emphasis was on Christ's humanity, He was still God the Son--a personification of the Divine and a symbol of salvation. Any attempt to develop His character in depth would have been at odds with this personification and symbolism. But by focusing on the naturalistic and mortal aspects of the people and events around Christ, the dramatist indirectly established an emotional sympathy between the audience and Christ the sufferer.

The most intense development of this emotional sympathy came in the actual staging of the Crucifixion. Through the concentration on the physically horrible details, and a highly

developed use of irony and tragic contrast, these plays made an intense and direct emotional appeal to the audience. A rather intense irony arose from the soldiers' inordinate concern with seeing their job well-done and the attention paid to even the smallest details of their work. The scene of stretching Christ's limbs out of joint and nailing Him to the Cross could be extremely effective with competent actors and staging. The irony of the soldiers' petty complaints at carrying the Cross and the sadistic and vindictive pleasure they showed when letting the Cross fall into the mortice added greatly to the contrast with Christ's silent suffering. The fact that Christ spoke only twice in the entire play (24 lines of 300) intensified this contrast between the tormentors and the sufferer. And Christ's final speech, directed to the audience who, through watching this scene and concentrating along with the soldiers on the physical details of the act, have been implicated in the crime, dramatically intensified each man's personal guilt in Adam's sin--now compounded by that of the Crucifixion:

Al men that walkis by waye or strete,
 Takes tente ye schalle no trauayle tyne,
 By-holdes myn heede, myn handis, and my feete,
 And fully feele nowe or ye fyne,
 Yf any mournyng may be meete
 Or myscheue mesured vnto myne.
 My Fadir, that alle bales may bete,
 For-giffis thes men that dois me pyne.
 What thai wirke wotte thai noght,
 Therefore my Fadir I craue
 Latte neuer ther synnes be sought
 But see ther saules to saue. (York, 35, ll. 253-264)

The realistic detail developed in the Crucifixion sequence also served to make the Resurrection more spectacular and meaningful. It was one thing to know that Christ rose from the dead-- it was quite another actually to watch Him die painfully, to experience the event emotionally as well as intellectually.

The use of this naturalistic detail underscores the fact that the controlling purpose of the drama was to serve doctrinal ends. The dramatist wanted to impress upon his audience the meaning of the Crucifixion in a way more intense, more comprehensive, than mere exposition or symbolism could achieve. The crucifixion was man's most vile act, the summation of all the evil that had begun with Adam's first sin and had grown to monstrous proportions throughout the centuries. But it was at the same time the way for man's salvation. Salvation required of man true repentance. Repentance required as its first step contrition.¹¹⁰ And contrition resulted from two sources: the fear of damnation by God resulting from recognition of one's sins, and a sincere love of God. To a large degree, the emotional response created through the use of realistic detail was designed to create in the audience a sincere compassion for Christ, who suffered such agony for them. They were first reminded of their implication in sin and of the need for salvation to escape the

¹¹⁰Prosser, p. 33. This work provides a full discussion of the medieval doctrine of repentance.

fearful Judgement of God, and they were then shown the means by which they could receive such salvation.

The stark and horrible realism of the Crucifixion also increased an already awesome and fearful prospect of the Last Judgement. The audience had just witnessed a man suffer a cruel and horrible death--the guilt for which they shared. The knowledge that that same man was to sit in judgement of them must have appreciably increased the apprehensions of a medieval audience already quite apprehensive of and morbidly fascinated with death. That each individual was guilty and deserved to be damned was clear. The entire cycle revealed the universal guilt shared by all mankind in its select representation of the history of salvation. The narration of that history, described by David Leigh as one of the most distinctive features of the Doomsday play, made it "relevant to the present time, both the 'present' of Doomsday and the 'present' of the audience."¹¹¹ God's recounting of the Creation, Fall and Crucifixion, and of His reasons for ending the world, and Christ's recalling of His sufferings served to make the audience directly aware of their own place in this cosmic scheme. This universal guilt became even more explicit and particularized through the depicting of anonymous good and

¹¹¹David Leigh, "The Doomsday Mystery Play: An Eschatological Morality," in Medieval English Drama, p. 266.

bad souls (York and Wakefield) or of universal social types (Chester) whose good deeds or evil deeds were revealed in the final Judgement. Knowledge of their own guilt and belief in the horrors of Hell would make the visual spectacle of the Judgement play personally relevant to each person in the audience.

The actual text of the York Mercers' play is primarily didactic and doctrinal. But the fact that the Mercers were among the most affluent guilds in York, added to the medieval love of spectacle,¹¹² makes it highly probable that the Judgement play was an elaborately staged production.¹¹³ Certainly the rising of the dead souls, the visual and sound effects accompanying the destruction of the earth, and the representation of a grotesque Hell-Mouth from which issued horribly costumed demons and into which fall the damned souls, all provided an extremely effective ending for the cycle. As we have noted, the existence of Hell and of horrible demons were real to the medieval audience. Their visual representations on the stage would give the spectacle an intense and awesome sense of reality. Furthermore, the realism of a final judgement day made the subject of the entire cycle immediate and personally relevant to every individual in the audience.

¹¹²Wickham, p. 111.

¹¹³See Johnston and Dorrell, pp. 29-34, for a list of stage properties and costumes of this play.

CHAPTER FOUR

The key to the Corpus Christi drama's effectiveness with its medieval audience lay with its success in establishing the personal relevance to each individual of a story the magnitude and profundity of which dwarfed man's power to comprehend it. F. M. Salter noted that a theme "greater than its handling" usually results in a comic farce, but that "nobody has ever found the mysteries unintentionally comic."¹¹⁴ The subject of the cycles was the concern for man's degeneracy and the means for his salvation--a subject spanning nothing less than the entire history of the world and beyond into eternity. It was a theme great indeed. But the cycle dramas were not ludicrous failures. On the contrary, too much evidence of their costs, civic importance, popularity, and longevity exists to allow such a mistaken assumption. Orchestrated in three great movements of Fall, conditional Redemption, and final Judgement, which correspond to the three times God actively intervened in temporal human affairs, these plays resulted in an experience that was at once entertaining and instructive, intellectually satisfying, and emotionally stimulating. The appeals in the plays to those three dominant

¹¹⁴Salter, p. 83.

modes of thought current in the Middle Ages--personification, symbolism, and naturalism--indicate a conscious attempt on the part of the dramatists to involve their audiences in the message of salvation. These appeals were to both the heart and the head--designed to render the message of salvation intelligible and to involve the audience in an emotional experience of that message. The success of the drama lay in creating in each individual an awareness of the personal meaning this message held for each and every man.

The way this effect was achieved--the way symbolic technique and naturalistic technique could exist on the same stage without violating aesthetic unity, the way actions of such magnitude and grave significance as the creation of the world, the murder of God in the person of Christ, or the final destruction of the world could even be attempted at all--was by self-consciously asserting the drama as play or game. V. A. Kolve's important study The Play Called Corpus Christi explored this game and play nature of the drama in depth and offered the most complete analysis of this subject.¹¹⁵ But for the purpose of the present study, it is important to understand that through this view of the drama as a game, the various elements of the drama were woven together to create an illusion not just of "reality" in the limited sense of verisimilitude--but of "reality" in its broadest sense as the medieval mind understood it. In accordance with medieval

¹¹⁵Kolve, intro. et passim.

perceptions of reality as a form of Idealism, these plays did not attempt to convince the audience of their own reality. Rather, as self-conscious play and game activity, the Corpus Christi drama became a vehicle for the contemplation of a higher reality. Through this world of game the medieval viewer could experience the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith. But the audience was constantly reminded that what they experienced was created through illusion.¹¹⁶ Still the experience itself would be genuine. If the illusion were successful, the audience would enter fully into the play world as participant, and would subtly become by play's end the protagonist.

The success of this theatrical illusion came from the application of the macrocosmic representation of Christian history to the microcosmic world of the individual. Thus, through the use of personification, symbolism, and naturalism, the dramatists established particularized parallels between the events represented on stage and the daily experiences of the audience. The fall of man through personification and symbolism involved each man in sin, the personal consequences of which he daily experienced. Subsequent plays presented vivid examples of man's inherent inadequacy to overcome by himself the effects of the fall, even though he is a good man

¹¹⁶Stevens, pp. 453-54.

and obedient to God (e.g., in the persons of Noah, Abraham, or Joseph). These plays established the need for redemption and, through the unifying element of typology, prefigured the means for that redemption. The vividly realistic detail of the Crucifixion plays served to compound the individual's guilt by first reminding him of his own inadequacy which necessitated the sacrifice of Christ, and then by actively and emotionally involving him in the actual sacrifice.

This attempt to involve the audience in the play world had other parallels throughout the cycles. The audience was often addressed directly and pointedly from the stage: as in Christ's poignant speech from the Cross quoted above or in the boisterous, bombastic opening speeches of the villains which were designed as much to quiet the audience as to reveal the evil nature of those tyrants. The effect of these direct appeals was to bridge the gap between spectator and actor and to bring the audience completely into the play world. The audience also became participants in the drama as a result of their proximity to the action. It is probable that in certain plays actors actually intermingled with the audience. Such staging would have been extremely effective in a play such as the Massacre of the Innocents or the Entry into Jerusalem. Indeed, such staging is indicated by the first soldier's speech in the York Shermen's pageant of Christ Led Up to Calvary:

The involvement of the audience as participant in the drama was one of the most significant achievements of medieval drama. If the Crucifixion itself was horribly tragic, nonetheless, in the Christian scheme it was also the means to salvation. The miracle of Christ's Resurrection became even more profound in light of the emphasis on his humanity. But, as the spectacular realism of the Judgement play represented in a most dramatic manner, this salvation was conditional. Hell was as real as Heaven. The final outcome of the play--whether it was to be comic or tragic--depended on the choices made by each individual in his daily existence. The drama attempted to create an experience that offered each person in the audience the opportunity to understand his position in the created universe and the possible consequences of the choices he made in his life. It was thus that each individual in the audience subtly became, in essence, the protagonist of the drama. Each individual in the audience was made aware of his situation. He faced great choices to which he must respond. Confronting strong forces both within himself and without, and possessing a will which was essentially free,¹¹⁸ his decisions and actions would finally resolve the central thematic issues raised by the plays. The official Church responses to those grave issues were clear and often expressed.

¹¹⁸Robertson, p. 34.

But the drama was written by men who understood men, who knew that the official answers were not always the easiest to accept or to maintain. The individual's answers had to come from the individual's will. The final message of the Corpus Christi drama, developed through a conscious attempt to involve the audience through the techniques of personification, symbolism, and realism, was effectively and summarily represented in the Judgement play by the image of Celestial Bliss on one side and a gaping, fiery Hell-Mouth on the other, with Christ between. The final choice belonged to the audience.

In order to appreciate the achievements of medieval Corpus Christi drama, modern readers must be willing to accept that drama in terms of the aesthetic principles which governed its creation. The medieval world view differs much from the modern. The ultimate source of beauty and the purposes of art present additional areas of difference between medieval and modern perspectives. Recognizing these differences and adjusting their aesthetic expectations accordingly, modern readers may find this drama less dissatisfying and more dramatically effective than has often been thought.

Specifically, modern readers must recognize that, in an age which generally perceived art as a functional element of life, the Corpus Christi drama performed important

functions in both the religious and secular contexts of medieval society. The primary purpose of the drama was to make intelligible the Christian message of salvation. The drama's success in performing these functions resulted from the unique relationship developed between the play world and its audience. The drama appealed to its audience intellectually and emotionally, involved its audience in the play world directly and indirectly, and ultimately challenged its audience to resolve issues of greatest importance to each individual. Given the importance of those issues and the scope of that message, modern criticism should recognize the effectiveness of the total dramatic experience produced by this drama as an achievement that warrants much more consideration than a summary dismissal as crude or primitive.

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