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**“Ilike a Creature, Takes Entente”:
A Re-investigation of the Purpose and
Effectiveness of Medieval
Corpus Christi Drama**

by

Roger Lee Haden

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“Ilike a Creature, Takes Entente”: A Re-investigation of the Purpose and Effectiveness of Medieval Corpus Christi Drama

by Roger Lee Haden*

The dual features of instruction and entertainment in medieval Corpus Christi drama seemingly create a problem for modern criticism because of its distaste for overtly instructive literature which poses an obstacle to the full appreciation of the effectiveness of a complete cycle. Modern approaches to medieval drama often share an underlying principle that “The religious plays are judged good by the degree to which they are not religious.”¹ Hence, critics often approach this drama with an *a priori* assumption that religious purpose counteracts conscious artistry and, thereafter, concern themselves only with external historical matters such as guild records, dates, sources, verse forms, linguistic peculiarities, etc., or search piecemeal for the “art” of the cycles in secular elements such as burlesque, satire, humor, realism, 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. The popularity, civic importance, and longevity of the Corpus Christi drama are some of the few subjects about which modern criticism of this drama can be certain. It seems prudent, then, to investigate what there was in these plays that held such an important and enduring appeal for their contemporary audiences. To do so requires some understanding of medieval perspectives toward art and of the fact that the principles informing modern perspectives are different from, and often opposed to, those that informed medieval perspectives.² 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.

The primary area of difference between the medieval and modern perspectives lies in the opposition of their respective

*Portions of this study originated in a thesis for the Master of Arts degree in English at Emporia State University.

¹Eleanor Prosser, *Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays*, p. 9.

²M. James Young, “The Unity of the English Mystery Cycles,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 58 (1972), 327.

dominant conventions. D. W. Robertson described the prevailing characteristic of medieval thought as the tendency to think in terms of symmetrical patterns, harmoniously arranged with reference to an abstract hierarchy; and that of modern thought as the tendency to think in terms of opposites, the dynamic interaction of which leads to a synthesis.³ The medieval conception of the universe beheld 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.⁴ This hierarchical mode of 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.⁵ 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, was a manifestation of this medieval tendency to conceptualize all of creation in terms of hierarchical structure and teleological significance.

The aesthetics informed by this hierarchical and teleological view became rather utilitarian — art was appreciated as a functional element of life.⁶ Underlying this 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.”⁷ If something were 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 merely 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.”⁸ 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 themselves. Moreover, the

³D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, p. 7.

⁴Frederick B. Artz, *The Mind of the Middle Ages*, p. 235.

⁵James I. Winsatt, *Allegory and Mirror*, p. 31.

⁶Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, p. 5.

⁷St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 9.

⁸St. Augustine, p. 10.

proper use of the visible, corporal, and temporal things of this world was the means of comprehending the invisible, spiritual, and eternal things of God.⁹ 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, “not only beautiful in itself, but . . . the source of all other beauty.”¹⁰ As long as men perceived art as a vehicle properly used to elevate mind above art to its ultimate source, they could make use of even more secular themes and subjects as adjuncts to worship.

As the medieval conception of the universal order was static, not dynamic, and 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 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.¹¹ 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 it substance, form, and credibility; and these works were accepted by audiences much less concerned with the inventiveness of the individual author than with the venerability of his subject. Generally, as 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 secondly by “the astonishing mastery, the perfectly natural rendering of all the details.”¹² In short, medieval art, and especially medieval drama, was a communal experience,¹³ an expression of collective beliefs, ideas, and aspirations. Among the most certain of these beliefs and the highest of these aspirations were those contained in the Christian message of man’s fall and redemption. In the dramatic expression of this message, the Corpus

⁹St. Augustine, p. 10.

¹⁰Robertson, p. 67.

¹¹Paul Zumthor, “From the Universal to the Particular in Medieval Poetry,” *Modern Language Notes*, 85(1970), 816.

¹²Huizinga, p. 264.

¹³F. M. Salter, *Medieval Drama in Chester*, p. 80.

Christi dramatists found the means to appeal to the entire medieval community.

The mandate of this communal drama 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 Stevens noted, "The Corpus Christi drama worked in its own time because it managed to bring the whole of spiritual history into the context of its world."¹⁴ This task was facilitated to a large degree, by the general homogeneity of thought and the adherence to a shared and accepted tradition which characterized the medieval mind set.

More specifically, medieval aesthetics were firmly rooted in the medieval concept of Realism.¹⁵ Realism in the Middle Ages was what modern philosophy tends to call 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, a characteristic especially apparent in the religious aspect of society.¹⁶ For cycle plays to mirror reality, then, the concern for the dramatist, in medieval terms, was not verisimilitude in the modern sense, but 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, 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

¹⁴Martin Stevens, "Illusion and Reality in the Medieval Drama," *College English*, 32 (1972), 453.

¹⁵Huizinga, p. 204.

¹⁶Huizinga, p. 200.

intelligible and relevant through art. Works, such as Emile Male'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 cathedrals¹⁷ Moreover, studies of the relationship between these art forms and the drama¹⁸ reveal a correspondence substantial enough to lead Woolf to suggest that one way of viewing the drama is as talking pictures.¹⁹ It should be expected, then, that these three techniques—personification, symbolism, and naturalism—greatly informed the Corpus Christi drama. One may examine, therefore, the particular effects of these techniques on the Corpus Christi drama in an attempt to determine, to at least some degree, the ways in which this drama was made effective to its medieval audience.

The first of these concepts, 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 alive²⁰ However, 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.²¹

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 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 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

¹⁷Emile Male, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey.

¹⁸Mary D. Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in Medieval English Churches*. See also Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, ch. 5.

¹⁹Woolf, p. 101.

²⁰Huizinga, p. 205.

²¹Male, *passim*. See also Huizinga, ch. 15; and Anderson, ch. 4.

concerned with the distinctions between these two uses of personification as would be a modern critic, because although the dramatists were undoubtedly aware of the spiritual and ethereal nature of God, Satan, angels, and demons, such supernatural beings were as real as any 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 the message by bringing the characters to life to re-enact the Christian story.

The drama implicitly defined each of these characters in terms of the relationship to God—personifying in the most general sense either good or evil.²² 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, perverted love of self: discord, disobedience, selfishness. The consistency of their actions and responses implied that these characters were to be viewed as personifications of either good or evil and not the mixture of both which 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 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.²³

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

²²V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 207.

²³Stevens, p. 453.

throughout the plays, beginning with Satan's first act of pride and disobedience and ending with the final triumph of God in the ultimate reinstatement of the proper hierarchy at the last Judgement.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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 mighty forces locked in a conflict of cosmic proportions in which man figured as both pawn and objective.²⁶

However, there was 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 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, wool
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 angells, pride is your foe.
All sorrowe shall shewe wheresoever yt is.²⁷

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

²⁴James Young, p. 330.

²⁵*The York Plays*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith, p. 18. Further references to the York Cycle will be noted in the text.

²⁶James Young, p. 332.

²⁷*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, eds. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, p. 10.

The personification of Satan had a similar humanizing effect which 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—facial expressions, gestures, voice intonation—may have enhanced 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, involving a more complex mental engagement, 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 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 one merely had to 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 extremely 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 Male 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 establish the universal Church of which the apostles are the symbol.²⁸

In a natural world pervaded by the Divine Essence, nothing was too small or too humble to symbolize Divine Essence. Hence, a walnut symbolized Christ: the kernel was His Divine nature, the outer peel His mortal humanity, and the wooden shell the Cross.²⁹ 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 permeated 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 Male, 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."³⁰

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 to a medieval audience, who would have readily understood and accepted symbolic props, actions, costumes, and characters. The Chester cycle represented the animals entering the Ark by means of 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;³¹ the York Doomsday pageant represented devils with grotesque two-faced masks and portrayed several angels by puppets or paintings;³²

²⁸Male, p. 11.

²⁹Huizinga, p. 206.

³⁰Male, p. 20.

³¹Arnold Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*, p. 102.

³²Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Dorrell, "The Doomsday Pageant of the York Mercers, 1433," *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 5 (1971), 29-34.

although the precise method of staging the particular cycles has not been completely determined,³³ all of the cycles shared a similar station-and-place technique of staging, a method which implicitly demanded symbolic journeys and stylized props; and the multi-level stage required in many of the plays would again require symbolic representations of Heavens, 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 accepted these as living symbols for the reality 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. Indeed, typology is of major importance, unique in that herein symbolism and personification (characterization) meet and blend into a system that many critics think is the major organizational principle of medieval Corpus Christi drama.³⁴ Typology, as defined by Walter Meyers, 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.³⁵

As a method of Biblical exegesis, typology identified patterns of consistency and teleological significance in the 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—expressing 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 represented in the cycles.³⁶

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, essentially types of Christ, took on added dimensions of meaning as the nuclei for various clusters of symbolic

³³James F. Hoy, "A Modern Analogue to Medieval Staging," *Journal of American Folklore*, 90 (1977), 182-83.

³⁴Walter F. Meyers, *A Figure Given: Typology in the Wakefield Plays*, *passim*.

³⁵Meyers, p. 8.

³⁶Kolve, p. 97.

associations formed around them. Adam, for example, was the first and often most significant type of Christ. Male describes in the following 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.³⁷

Abel symbolized Christ both in death as a figure of Crucifixion and in life as a shepherd whose offering of the lamb prefigured the eucharistic sacrifice.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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 supplanted with the New Law,⁴⁰ and as the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt, as Christ led the patriarchs from Limbo.⁴¹ All of these figures had their fulfillment in Christ.

Characters representative of evil also revealed the influence of typology; but, whereas the development of the types of Christ followed an inductive method, with specific types leading up to and finding fulfillment in the ultimate source of all good, 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 Cain, Pharaoh, 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, sees Pilate as a figure of "consummate depravity, a foil for Jesus."⁴² As Christ was the antitype for the good men of Christian history, Pilate was the antitype for the evil men:

³⁷Male, p. 153.

³⁸Woolf, p. 124.

³⁹Male, p. 156.

⁴⁰Male, p. 156.

⁴¹Woolf, p. 153.

⁴²Meyers, p. 43.

“ . . . [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.”⁴³ This satanic typology contrasted with the Old Testament types of Christ. Such a 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 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.⁴⁴ Her refusal to enter the Ark and her antics in argument with Noah provided burlesque humor and injected lively action into a necessarily very stylized and symbolic play. At the same time, she also symbolized the effects of the Fall. Her disobedience paralleled Eve's disobedience and, by way of contrast, anticipated 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 Male describes:

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.⁴⁵

This symbolism added greater significance to Christ's refusal 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).

⁴³Meyers, p. 47.

⁴⁴Williams, p. 121.

⁴⁵Male, p. 190.

Another effect of symbolism was that of enhancing the dramatic effectiveness of the cycles by 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 receives 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, he 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 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, and reminded him 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 pervasiveness 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.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the Corpus Christi dramatist did not care only to show off his own mental

⁴⁶Huizinga, p. 208.

dexterity in forming or repeating such associations; rather, he sought to engage his audience in an emotionally charged dramatic experience as well. To create such emotional appeals, the dramatists, therefore, made use of naturalism, the third dominant mode of expression,⁴⁷ more physical, more visual, and more emotionally effective than 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.⁴⁸ 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, partly a result of the preaching of the Franciscan friars, whose novel message accented the suffering and humanity of Christ in the attempt to produce in their audience a "direct acquaintance with" these events.⁴⁹ It 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.⁵⁰ This emotionalizing and humanizing influence led to a growing emphasis upon the carnal and mortal aspects of life. Huizinga identifies this growing emotionalism as "a sort of pathetic naturalism," its roots extending back to the mysticism of St. Bernard in the 12th century. The result of this influence 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."⁵¹ 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 grotesque. The art of the period often seems to be a commentary on the Biblical line, "Jesus wept."⁵² Details of Christ's humanity, His agony and suffering, the

⁴⁷The 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 the total purpose—medieval realism as a dramatic device was one means to dramatic effectiveness; it was not an end in itself.

⁴⁸Henry Osborn Taylor, *The Medieval Mind*, I. See esp. ch. 15.

⁴⁹Quoted 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.

⁵⁰Huizinga, p. 264.

⁵¹Huizinga, p. 263.

⁵²Artz, p. 400.

pathetic suffering of the Virgin Mary, and the subsequent martyrdom of the Saints were continually dominant themes. Typical is 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.⁵³

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 real as anything in the observable world. When spectacularly represented in art and drama, with obvious and 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 naturalism was most effective.⁵⁴ The concern for realistic effects allowed for, even demanded, dramatic expansion. Robinson describes 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."⁵⁵ As examples of the York Realist's attention to realistic human processes of thought and action, Robinson notes such instances as Herod's concern that his shirt be stylish (*York*, 31, ll. 76-77), or the servant's concern for the temperature of the water in which Pilate was to wash his hands (*York*, 33, ll. 42-43). The

⁵³Prosser, p. 13.

⁵⁴For a discussion of this technique in the York Cycle, see J. W. Robinson, "The Art of the York Realist," *Modern Philology*, 60 (1963), 230-44; and Davidson, pp. 270-83.

⁵⁵Robinson, p. 235.

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 "wikked werk," and because the porter quite naturally would not want to disturb his masters without good cause (*York*, 26, ll. 155-190)—represents another example of natural mental processes and provides an expansion of the scene that both heightens dramatic tension and makes clear Judas' role as betrayer. Still another example is 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 is symbolic of discord, which had been unknown before, it also presents a particularly realistic human touch. Thus, the entire series is a dramatic expansion of the Genesis story that makes no mention of any such argument. The major appeal of this play, however, is symbolic. The final effect of the pageant is to symbolize each man's general and personal involvement in disobedience and sin. The effects of naturalism and spectacle are 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 found in the structure of the cycles. In Christian theology, the Nativity and the Resurrection form the two central episodes of Christian history. Both 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. Whereas earlier plays in the cycle often telescoped time to cover thousand of years (sometimes, as in the Noah play, spanning hundreds of years in a single play), the events of Christ's Passion slow down time, involving 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, present ample opportunity for the development of villainous character 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) is itself an effect of realism. Although the emphasis is upon Christ's humanity, He is 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 establishes an emotional sympathy between the audience and Christ the sufferer.

The most intense development of this emotional sympathy occurred in the actual staging of the Crucifixion. Through concentration upon 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 from 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 measured vnto myne.
 For-giffis thes men that dois me pyne.
 What thai wirke wotte thai noght,
 Therfore my Fair 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 which had grown to monstrous proportions

throughout the centuries. 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.⁵⁶ 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 great extent, the emotional response created by 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 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 cruel and horrible death—the guilt for which they shared. The knowledge that this same man was to sit in judgment of them must have appreciably increased the apprehensions of an 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 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.”⁵⁷ 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 concept of universal guilt became even more explicit and particularized through the depicting of anonymous good and 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.

Although the actual text of the York Mercers' play is primarily didactic and doctrinal, the fact that the Mercers were among the most affluent guilds in York, added to the medieval love of spectacle,⁵⁸ makes it highly probable that the Judgement play was an elaborately staged production.⁵⁹ Certainly the rising of the dead

⁵⁶Prosser, p. 33.

⁵⁷David Leigh, “The Doomsday Mystery Play: An Eschatological Morality,” in *Medieval English Drama*, eds. Jerome Taylor and Alan Nelson, p. 266.

⁵⁸Glyan Wickham, *Early English Stages*, I, 1300-1575, III.

⁵⁹See Johnston and Dorrell, pp. 29-34, for a list of stage properties and costumes of this play.

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 to the cycle. As has been noted, the existence of Hell and of horrible demons was real to the medieval audience. Their visual representations would give the spectacle an intense and awesome sense of reality. Furthermore, the realism of a final judgment day made the subject of the entire cycle immediate and personally relevant to every individual in the audience.

The key to the effectiveness of the Corpus Christi drama lay within its success in establishing the personal relevance, to each individual, of a story, the magnitude and profundity of which dwarfed man's power of comprehension. Salter notes that a theme "greater than its handling" usually results in a comic farce, but that "nobody has ever found the mysteries unintentionally comic."⁶⁰ The subject of the cycles was the concern for man's degeneracy and the means for his salvation—spanning nothing less than the entire history of the world and beyond into eternity. It was a great theme, 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 for such an assumption. Orchestrated into three great movements of Fall, conditional Redemption, and final Judgement, corresponding to the three times in which God actively intervened in temporal human affairs, these plays resulted in an experience at once entertaining and instructive, intellectually satisfying, and emotionally stimulating. The appeals in the plays to those three dominant 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 which 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

⁶⁰Slater, p. 83.

be attempted at all—was by self-consciously asserting the drama as play or game. Kolve's important study, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, explores this game and play in depth and offers the most complete analysis of this subject.⁶¹ However, for the purpose of the present study, it is important to understand that through a view of this drama as a game, the various elements 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 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 though illusion.⁶² 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 plays'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, dramatists established particularized parallels between events represented on stage and the daily experiences of the audience. The fall of man in 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 and obedient to God (e.g., in the persons of Noah, Abraham, or Joseph). These plays emphasized redemption and, through the unifying element of typology, prefigured the means for redemption. The vividly realistic detail of the Crucifixion plays compounded 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.

Involving 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, or in the boisterous, bombastic opening speeches of the villains designed as much to quiet the audience as to reveal the evil

⁶¹Kolve, intro. *et passim*.

⁶²Stevens, pp. 453-54.

nature of tyrants. The effect of these direct appeals was to bridge the gap between spectator and actor, bringing 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. This staging would have been extremely effective in plays 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*:

Therefore I comaunde you on euere ilke a side,
Vppon payne of enprisonment that noman appere
To suppowle this traytoure, by tyme ne by tyde,
Noght one of this prees;
Nor noght ones so hardy for to enquere,
But helpe me holly, all that are here,
this kaitiffe care to encrees.
Therefore make rome and rewle you nowe right,
That we may with this weried wight
Wightly wende on oure waye.

(York, 34, ll. 9-18)

Another indication of this type of staging occurs in Satan's entrance in the York *Temptation* play:

Make rome be-lyve, and late me gang,
Who makis here all this thrang?
High you hensel high myght you hang
 right with a roppe.
I drede me that I dwelle to lang
 to do a jape.

(York, 22, ll. 1-6)

Still another means for completely involving the audience in the drama occurred in the use of the topical allusions, costumes, and artistic anachronism, devices that gave a sense of immediacy and relevancy to the events being enacted. Through their use, the drama established, in Kolve's words, "a time and place that are roughly contemporary, and more or less English," an effect that underscored the "drama's interest in addressing its particular English audience in their particular moment in time."⁶³ As a way of emphasizing the relevancy of its message, the drama attempted to make clear that it was not only the ancient Jews who rejected and horribly crucified Christ—it was medieval England as well.

The involvement of the audience as participant was one of the

⁶³Kolve, p. 113.

most significant achievements of medieval drama. If the Crucifixion itself were 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 upon 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 comic or tragic—depended upon the choices made by each individual in his daily existence. The drama attempted to create an experience that offered each person in the audience an 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, facing great choices to which he must respond. Confronting strong forces both within himself and without, and possessing a will essentially free,⁶⁴ in his decisions and actions, he would finally resolve the central thematic issues raised by the plays. Although the official Church responses to these grave issues were clear and often expressed, the drama was written by men who understood men, who knew that official answers were not always the easiest to accept or 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 the 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 this drama in terms of the aesthetic principles that governed its creation. The medieval world view differs much from the modern. The ultimate source of beauty and the purposes of art pose additional areas of difference between medieval and modern perspective. 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. Its primary purpose was to

⁶⁴Robertson, p. 34.

make intelligible the Christian message of salvation. Its success in performing this function 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 the issues and the scope of the message, modern criticism should recognize the effectiveness to the total dramatic experience produced by this drama as an achievement that warrants more consideration than a summary dismissal as crude or primitive.

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