SOME USES OF THE COMIC IN THE ENGLISH CORPUS CHRISTI CYCLES

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One of the more interesting literary productions of medieval England is the Corpus Christi cycles, groups of plays depicting the events of Christian salvation history, such as the creation of the world, the prophets of the Old Testament, the life of Christ, and ending with the Last Judgment. These were performed every year at the time of the feast of Corpus Christi, usually during the month of June.[1] They flourished in a number of English towns from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, though only four complete or substantially complete cycles are extant today, Wakefield (Towneley), York, Chester, and N-Towne (Ludus Coventriae). In most places the plays were produced by the local craft guilds, though in some towns special religious guilds had charge of them. The dramas were presented with great pomp, usually on a series of wagons pulled through the streets, while the audience watched from window or curbside.[2]

The basic outlines of these plays are familiar to any reader of the Bible, but they contain a different mode of presentation, a mode perhaps peculiarly medieval, and which to modern readers has often seemed strange or inappropriate.

[1]"Corpus Christi falls between May 23 and June 24, depending on the date of Easter; because of inaccuracies in the old calendar during the late Middle Ages, however, the original dates were actually equivalent to June 4–July 6 on a modern calendar." David Bevington, *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 230.

[2]For a good general introduction to the Corpus Christi cycles, see V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 1966).

For in contrast to modern religious plays intended for a mass audience, which are apt to be saccharine in their spirituality and pietistic in tone, the cycle plays abound with vulgar humor and slapstick comedy. For example, in the second play of the Wakefield cycle, the Killing of Abel (Mactatio Abel), Cain responds to his brother Abel's friendly greeting with the line, "Come kiss my arse...."[3] This sort of humor has made the plays controversial in many people's eyes. Earlier critics saw in the cycles a "distasteful raucousness and indecorum," and more recently some have considered the humor in these plays as inappropriate to their sacred or didactic purpose, or "part of the process of 'secularization.'"[4]

Although I think such judgments are wrong, nevertheless I believe that the connection between the humor in the cycles and the plays' basic aims is liable to be misunderstood. We are apt to think that religious plays must have a purely religious aim, that is, either devotional or didactic, and that to the extent they include other elements, such as humor, it must be a concession to the audience. But what to later cultures seemed incongruous, medieval culture saw as all of a piece, in the sense that they all proceeded from the same source, God. For the humor in these plays is not simply a bit of comic relief inserted in basically "serious" dramas in order to keep the audience's attention, but rather is a reflection of medieval culture's unitary approach to its most basic beliefs, beliefs which encompassed everything, good and evil, serious and comic.[5] How the comic is situated as part of this whole I will examine in this paper, in particular distinguishing two different kinds of comedy in these plays, and showing how each contributed to the overall aims of the cycles.

In the first place, it is well to set these questions within an understanding of the general medieval attitude toward the place and value of humor. Although some medieval writers taught that laughter and the comic were to be shunned, this was not the usual view.[6] V. A. Kolve quotes an early fifteenth century English work, *Dives et Pauper*, for example, which gives a thorough justification for humor. After stating that laughter, mirth, and honest recreation were fitting for Sundays and other holy days, the principal speaker in the dialogue, Pauper (the Poor Man), gives the underlying reason for his statements.

[3]All quotations from the Wakefield cycle are taken from the edition in modern English, *The Wakefield Mystery Plays*, edited by Martial Rose (New York: Norton, 1969). This quotation is on page 75.

[4]Bevington, p. 239. Bevington is noting the views of other critics but does not himself subscribe to this view. Clifford Davidson remarks that this "comedy remains controversial among those who...stress the importance of the didactic in medieval religious drama." "Jest and Earnest: Comedy in the Work of the Wakefield Master," *Annuale Mediaevale* 22 (1982): 65.

[5]Bevington, p. 240.

[6]Kolve, pp. 124-134, 139-140.

> ...the rest the mirth the ese and the welfare that god hath ordeyned in the halidayes is token of endlesse reste ioye and myrthe and welfare in heuenes blisse that we hope to haue withouten ende.[7]

Kolve also quotes a popular medieval story of the laughter of St. Brice. While St. Martin of Tours was saying Mass, Brice began laughing. When he had finished the Mass, Martin asked Brice what he was laughing about, and Brice replied that he had had a vision in which he saw the devil hit his head against the wall and that made him laugh. "And whan seint Martin herde hym, he knewe that seint Brice was an holy man."[8]

Thus we can see that in their very raison d'etre for laughter the medievals referred to their basic theological principles. Moreover, by the principle of *ridendo dicere verum* (by jesting to speak truth),[9] the comic was able to be used with serious aims. If therefore we shall find that the comedy in the Corpus Christi cycles was involved in the total religious meaning of the plays, this should not surprise us.

In the most representative of these plays, the humor and slapstick are pervasive and usually associated with the evil characters, so that this aspect is sometimes referred to as the "comedy of evil." If we examine two of the plays from the Wakefield cycle, the Killing of Abel (Mactatio Abel) and the Buffeting of Christ (Coliphizatio),[10] using a framework of a comic theory, we can see the comedy of evil at work and assess its purpose in the dramatic action.[11]

The Killing of Abel concerns the offering of sacrifice by Cain and his brother, Abel, and the subsequent murder of Abel by Cain, the first murder mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 4:2-16). The play opens with an harangue to the audience by Garcio, Cain's boy or farmhand, an extra-biblical addition to the story.

[7]Ibid., p. 133.

[8]Ibid., p. 140.

[9]See Davidson, p. 66.

[10]These two plays are both considered to be from the pen of the Wakefield Master. Thus what is said here applies most fully to his work, but also to the other plays in the Wakefield cycle, and, to a lesser extent, to the other cycles. For a list of the Wakefield Master's contributions to the cycle, see Davidson, p. 65.

[11]I will follow, for the most part, Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1968).

> All hail, all hail, be blithe and glad,
> For here come I, a merry lad;
> Have done your din, my master bad,
> Or else the devil you speed.
> Know you not I come before?
> And he who jangles any more
> Must on my black horn blow a score,
> Both behind and before,
> Till his teeth bleed.[12]

Garcio continues in this vein, and when Cain enters at line 24 the two of them engage in loud arguing, slapstick and mutual abuse. This sort of thing continues throughout the play. Later Abel manages to persuade a reluctant Cain to join him in offering a sacrifice to God from the product of his hands, in Cain's case, from his harvested crop. Cain then rummages through his sheaves of grain searching for the smallest ones, complaining about all the hard work he has put into growing his crop, about hard times generally, and, of course, cursing Abel throughout.

Even the actual murder of Abel by Cain is dealt with in such a way. After Abel has died, Cain turns to the audience and makes one of his outlandish threats:

> And if any of you think I did amiss,
> I shall amend it, worse then it is,
> That all men may it see:
> Much worse than it is
> Right so shall it be.[13]

This is absurd, of course, because even with the less rigid boundaries between actor and audience in the medieval stage, everyone knew that Cain the character was not about to walk out and begin beating up people in the audience. Equally making it absurd, is the fact that everyone watching knew that God would punish Cain for this murder, yet all he can do is make vain threats; he is foolishly unconcerned with the real issues at stake, such as the evaluation of his conduct

[12]Rose, p. 73. The original of the seventh line is "He must blaw my blak hoill bore," which Bevington renders, "He must blow my black hollow hole" (p. 275). Though this line is obscure, it likely is a scatological reference, meaning roughly the same as Cain's "Come kiss my arse..." (Rose, p. 75). This sort of talk is characteristic of Cain and Garcio. In the same speech in which Cain tells Abel, "Come kiss my arse...," he also tells him to "kiss the devil's tail."

Garcio's speech to the audience sets the tone for the slapstick and insults that will follow, and his obviously impotent (because unrealizable) threats make him a ridiculous figure, a comic butt whom we laugh at. As we will see later, this is an important part of our analysis of the comic element in these plays.

[13]Rose, p. 82.

by God. This kind of play, then, and the others like it, even when dealing with serious issues, has an overall comic tone and atmosphere. But this is not the case with the other sort of humor in the cycles.

The Buffeting, or questioning and beating of Christ at the house of the chief priests, Annas and Caiaphas,[14] is representative of a different type of humor found in the cycles. In the sort of humor discussed above, the characters rant and rave and we are intended to laugh at what they do. But in the Buffeting and the other plays about Christ's suffering and death it is the characters in the play, the characters conceived of as evil, who joke and jest and laugh. They do this as they abuse and beat Christ. For example, here is a section of dialog from the Buffeting in which three characters, 1st Torturer, 2nd Torturer, and their boy servant, Froward, banter among themselves as they beat Christ.

1st Torturer:	Thus we him bereave of all his fond tales.
2nd Torturer:	Thy fist fails to grieve or else thy heart fails.
Froward:	I can my hand upheave and upset the scales.
1st Torturer:	God forbid then ye leave but set in your nails As you thrust. Sit up and prophesy.
Froward:	But tell us no lie.
2nd Torturer:	Who smote thee last?
1st Torturer:	Fast to Sir Caiaphas go we together.
2nd Torturer:	Rise up with ill grace so come thou hither.
Froward:	It seems by his pace he grudges to go thither.
1st Torturer:	We have given him a glaze that, ye may consider, Will keep.
2nd Torturer:	Sir, for his great boast, He looks more like a ghost.
Froward:	In faith, sir, we had almost Knocked him to sleep.[15]

This is humor, not for the audience, but only for the characters torturing Christ. In what way, if at all, it can be considered comedy we will presently see.

In the first type of humor, the Cain-Garcio type, we have what is genuine comedy, even farce. Cain and Garcio are not laughing, of course. They abuse one another or Abel, curse, make outrageous threats. The audience laughs at their ridiculous statements and conduct. Their empty threats, their constant complaints, their selfish actions—these are what we laugh at because they are too

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[14]All the Gospels recount this incident: Matthew 26:57-75; Mark 14:53-72; Luke 22:54-65; John 18:12-27.

[15]Rose, pp. 370-371. This mocking humor is, of course, mentioned in the Gospel accounts themselves.

ludicrous to be taken seriously.[16] From the opening threats of Garcio to Cain's stinginess about the sacrifice, Cain and Garcio are shown to have no understanding of themselves or of the import of their actions. The audience laughs that any human being could be as selfish as Cain about a sheaf of grain, yet so indifferent to his theological destiny, that is, to his salvation or damnation.[17] Yet to the extent that the audience can recognize that they too share in these faults, they laugh not so much at Cain and Garcio as at human folly and lack of self-knowledge.[18] The spirit behind the humor and behind our laughter is a humane look at our own folly, humane in the sense that we are able to laugh at Cain and Garcio—and at ourselves—not curse them or call for their damnation. [19]

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[16]As we saw, even the murder of Abel is presented in such a way as to be comic. How can a murder be comic? "When we say...that tragedy imitates a serious action, we mean that it imitates an action *which it makes serious*; and comparably, comedy imitates an action *which it makes a matter for levity*" (Olson, p. 36–emphasis author's). Thus Cain's actions are presented as funny, including the murder. Of course, the Cain and Abel story could be presented seriously, as it is in the Bible.

[17]In comedy "we must be made to feel that the object deserves whatever he gets" (Olson, pp. 62-63). Olson distinguishes between the *ridiculous* and the *ludicrous*. The former "is always inferior, in a way which obviates the possibility of taking him seriously–that is, as the object of any serious emotion...," while the later is "merely involved in something ludicrous, without actually doing anything ludicrous..." (p. 20). These both can be considered as comic butts. And, on the other hand, there can be wits as the chief character in comedy, so that, "Properly speaking, then, the comic includes only the ridiculous, the ludicrous, ...the witty, and the humorous" (p. 23). These result in a fourfold schema, in which there are plots of folly and plots of cleverness, with a butt or a wit respectively as the central character, who may be either well-intentioned or ill-intentioned. Thus this play is one with a plot of folly, and Cain and Garcio are examples of ill-intentioned fools for whom "there must be failure" (pp. 52-53).

[18]Davidson says that Cain's action "reminds the audience of their own natural selfishness..." (p. 67).

[19]Although the relationship between the one laughing and the one laughed at can, as Olson says (p. 16), emphasize "the *unlike*," and even go so far that one says, "I take pleasure in his pain," that is, in the pain of the one whom we laugh at, this is not always the case. Olson says elsewhere that "the comic quality is dependent upon the relation of the one who laughs to the one he laughs at. That relation is either friendly or hostile or indifferent" (p. 62). He points out, for example, that Shakespeare's "comic agents...are viewed with affection" (p. 91), and that in the case of Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* "What we *chiefly* react to is the manifest silliness of his supposition that he can repair his fortunes by seducing the wives and the absurd consequences that this supposition brings about" (p. 92). Cain, despite the fact that he is a murderer, is presented as a figure of ridicule rather than of fear or hatred, and, as we have seen, even the actual murder is handled in this way. His ineffectual threats to the audience simply highlight his foolishness and impotence.

The Cain-Garcio type of comedy, then, would tend to make the audience identify the acts portrayed in the plays with the acts of their own and their neighbors' lives, not just as events in sacred history.[20] As Bevington says,

> A comic vision of man's inadequacy enabled the spectators of medieval drama to identify with a Noah or a Joseph not unlike themselves, troubled in wedlook, aging, humbled by awareness of inadequacy, and above all harassed by doubts of divine purpose.[21]

By identifying their own faults with those of the characters, the audience was to conceive their own need for redemption, and by watching the degeneration of the world following the Fall of Adam, they could likewise perceive in this the world of their own time;[22] but equally they are able to see the evidence of divine purpose and divine mercy, thus reaffirming the central beliefs shared by the community.

What of the second type of humor, that of Christ's suffering and death, where the characters themselves jest? Here is a reversal of the first type in that it is only the characters in the play who joke and laugh. It was inconceivable that the spectators would join in their laughter,[23] nor are the torturers presented in such a way that they would laugh *at* them. For they are neither butt nor wit, that is, they neither make themselves comic through their actions, as does Cain, nor do they succeed in making others the butt of their own jokes.[24] It is true that they attempt this, and they suppose they are being very funny as they mock Christ, but in fact there is nothing comic in what they do or in what Christ suffers. Just because "brutal persons may laugh at a man who is being led to execution, or at the commission of some great crime" does not make it funny for others.[25]

Like Cain, Christ's torturers exhibit their extreme folly and lack of understanding of what they do. But the effect on the audience is entirely different. Cain did not laugh as he killed Abel; it is his ridiculous rage that is so funny. But

[20]"The plays are not presented merely as representations of biblical events from the Fall to Doomsday but are simultaneously pictures of everyday life." Cecilia Pietropoli, "The Characterisation of Evil in the Towneley Plays," *Medieval English Theatre* 11.1-2 (1989): 85.

[21]P. 240.

[22]"The Wakefield Master chose to shape the Christian story into a powerful *exemplum* to urge the contemporary audience to repent, to draw back from the evils around them and 'endure captivity and hope for liberty'." Alexandra F. Johnston, "Evil in the Towneley Cycle," *Medieval English Theatre* 11.1-2 (1989): 101-02.

[23]"These dramatists presented the death of Christ as a thing of consummate horror and shame, clearly intending that the violence and laughter on stage should be answered by silence and awe in the audience, and if recent productions of these Passion episodes may offer a guide, they succeeded." Kolve, p. 138.

[24]Olson, pp. 64-65.

[25]Ibid., p. 61.

in the play of the Buffeting humor is not used to evoke a comic regarding of human folly, but to inspire those who watched the plays with tenderness toward Christ.[26] Kolve argues that the torturers do not focus on Christ, rather on the game they are making;[27] similarly I think the play intends that we focus on what is happening to Christ, not on who is doing it. The jesting becomes simply part of the horrible action of the human race crucifying its God. It makes his suffering seem that much worse to us and it adds to the cumulative effect of all the evil done to Christ from his arrest to the spear thrust into his side after his death. Thus in the case of this second kind of humor, its purpose in being included was to nourish the pious spirit that was behind the entire cycle, indeed which is integral to the Christian religion itself.[28]

Although this second kind of play contains humor in the sense that some of the characters laugh and jest, in what sense, if any, may we call these plays comedies? If we focus on the *characters'* little comedy for a moment, we may say that their treatment of Christ is an extreme example of treating the comic butt as someone "*unlike* ourselves."[29] Moreover,

> The *persons* whom we find ridiculous are those whom we feel we can slight, and slight deservedly and with impunity; to whom, therefore, we feel superiority...and those who believe differently from us....[30]

However, unlike Cain and Garcio, who truly exhibit the characteristics of ill-intentioned fools and are rightly subjects of laughter, Christ has not done anything worthy of ridicule. In making him an object of ridicule the torturers, as I said above, are revealing their own brutal sense of humor, and showing themselves as ill-intentioned fools, but not fools we laugh at.

Are the plays of this second type, those chiefly of the sufferings and death of Christ, comedies at all? Olson notes that

> we can make our story extremely serious by telling the story so that it...[involves] persons whose good or evil fortunes are of the greatest possible value to us. On the other hand...we can turn it into the comic...by rendering absurd any part of the complex opinion on which seriousness rests...."[31]

[26]Kolve, pp. 4-6, 138-139.

[27]Pp. 175-205. See also, Jeffrey Helterman, *Symbolic Action in the Plays of the Wakefield Master* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1981), p. 144.

[28]Hans-Jürgen Diller argues against those who hold that in this type of humor "there is to be found an undercurrent of irreverence and even blasphemy which runs against the plays' official, religious purpose." See "The Torturers in the English Mystery Plays," *Medieval English Theatre* 11.1-2 (1989): 57-75.

[29]Olson, p. 15.

[30]Ibid., pp. 14-15.

[31]Ibid., pp. 108-109.

It is clear that to a medieval audience, the sufferings of Christ were of a person "whose good or evil fortunes" were "of the greatest possible value." And on the other hand, the antics of Cain and Garcio rendered absurd almost everything they did. This is why, as we saw, even the murder of Abel did not make that play serious.[32] The whole thing is presented as too ridiculous to be taken seriously.

Is the Buffeting then a tragedy? The pity evoked from the audience is certainly the pity of tragedy, "'pity...for the man suffering undeserved misfortune,'" but does not seem to be matched by the corresponding "'fear for the man like ourselves,'"[33] for the audience did not fear that they themselves would have to undergo the sufferings of Christ. However, if we see that "the intention of the cycle as a whole is comic"[34] we can avoid classifying this play as a tragedy, for it is subsumed under the beneficent purpose of the entire action of the cycle.

Above I said that the connection between comedy and the evil characters—the "comedy of evil"—needed to be explained. Now I think we can see why there is this connection. If the comic mode is especially useful for rendering past actions present, and doing this so that we hardly notice what is happening, then it is a very useful device for bringing to mind our own misdeeds as we look at the misdeeds of the past. And the second type of comedy, the type used in the play of the Buffeting, can be very powerful for making something seem more terrible, since the mocking of a sacred thing or person is terrible to view. Here again its appropriateness is apparent.

There are thus two fundamentally different sorts of humor in these plays, one that invites us to laugh and look at the folly of all of us; the other, which is humor only in the eyes of the evil characters, that increases our horror and pity when Christ himself is tormented by sinful men. I think that an understanding of these comic modes and their uses helps materially toward removing some of the oddness we might feel about their use in the cycles. Yet there remains some element of strangeness. We are not likely to have chosen such modes were we to have written these plays. As Kolve says, "...we have lost the habits of mind, the ways of honoring, that fostered this kind of comic invention."[35] Arnold Williams' comment is more apt still.

> The truth is that medieval artists could do such things precisely because their belief was unshakeable. If you believe, as Dante did, in the papacy, you can put the pope in hell. And hence these sudden

[32]As Olson notes, abduction, rape, cheating of someone out of his home and goods–all these have been made matter for comedy by various playwrights. Everything depends on how the story is told. (Cf. pp. 82-85, 103-105 and 108-110.)

[33]Ibid., p. 37. Olson is quoting here Aristotle's *Poetics*, 13 (1453a).

[34]Bevington, p. 240.

[35]Kolve, p. 173.

> forays into burlesque, mixing the sublime and the vulgar, which abound in Towneley, York, and Chester, and are occasionally implicit even in Ludus.[36]

What Williams says here about strong belief is surely true, but I do not think it is the whole story. More important is the communal nature of that belief. Individuals in medieval society not only had private faith, but the society as a whole, publicly and officially and as a habit of thought, held those beliefs and expressed them in a public manner. The cycles themselves were obvious examples of this public expression of faith. John Gassner makes a similar point about the theatrical productions themselves.

> A peoples' theatre in the fullest sense–a festival lasting several days or longer inspired by epic or "universal" matter and unifying belief, the faith of the Universal or Catholic Church, and an open-air theatre of large casts and of a vast semi-participating public (many of the performers, the non-professional ones, were themselves members of the public in being members of the medieval trade or craft associations or "guilds" responsible for many of the productions)–this is the medieval theatre in its most impressive manifestations.[37]

The cycles were able to be this "peoples' theatre" because the shared faith which they both depended on and expressed was truly popular. Thus, I think, it is a mistake to assume that the purpose of the cycles was mainly didactic, i.e., to teach the populace the stories of the Bible. No doubt there was this aspect, but even more it was a communal expression, even witness or celebration, of this corporately held belief, a belief that encompassed and explained, and thus could include, everything there was. Some scholars have referred to such activities as "cultural performances." As Kathleen Ashley comments, "Anthropologists have defined cultural performances as occasions on which a society dramatizes its collective myths, defines itself, and reflects on its practices and values...."[38]

As a result, then, there was room for play, for playfulness, for the whole of life, because all these were understood and could be explained according to the theological principles that permeated the culture. Thus the "mixing of the sublime and the vulgar," as Williams calls it, comes about when a society is able to integrate all of human activity into its theology, not only the sacred, and because of this, sees nothing wrong in speaking of God in any available mode.[39] In a

[36]Arnold Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1961), p. 129.

[37]*Medieval and Tudor Drama* (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. xvi.

[38]Kathleen M. Ashley, "Cultural Approaches to Medieval Drama," in Richard K. Emmerson, ed., *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1990), p. 57.

[39]Ibid., p. 58. "Distinctions between secular and sacred and between folk and elite were not important on those occasions of communal festivity."

particular way for medieval society, this is rooted in the Catholic doctrine of the Incarnation, of God really becoming a human being and sharing in all the details of human life. To the extent that the modern world, and even modern religion, has repudiated or failed to see the implications of this doctrine, the modes of humor in the cycles will seem out of place. But that is the result of the different choices that medieval and modern civilizations have each made. If we are comfortable with the results of our choice then we have nothing to be dissatisfied about. But if not, we know where we can find another path.

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