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Metatheatre in the English Mystery Cycles: Expositor, Contemplatio, Prolocutor and Others

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IN THIS PAPER I should like to address two uncertainties which in themselves prevent us from developing a single theory as to how and why Expositor figures are used in the English biblical cycle plays. The term “Expositor” is shorthand for several such persons appearing in these plays, amongst whom Contemplacio and Doctor are also used quite often. I shall also look at metatheatrical aspects of these figures, which, I shall suggest, may help us to appreciate the nature of the dramatic process on offer to the audiences. The two features affecting our interpretation are the variability of the state of the texts concerned and the phenomenon that, unlike a considerable number of continental cycle plays, none of the English ones depends comprehensively or even consistently upon the pervasive presence and function of an Expositor figure. The only exception to this is the three surviving episodes by John Bale from what was apparently a cycle centring upon the Passion. The irregularity of the appearances in the other cycles means that we may question why they do indeed appear in certain places and, by implication, not elsewhere. In the course of this study, I propose to draw upon some of the results of bibliographical scholarship of these texts, since they may shed some light upon the incidence of these figures.

I hope to develop some details of the continental practice, especially with regard to French and German cycles in a complementary paper. Here it is perhaps sufficient to say with regard to German-language cycles that in those from Alsfeld and Künzelsau there is a consistent presence of an Expositor who mediates much of the dramatic experience, and that the Swiss *Luzerner Osterspiel* also has a significant presence of such figures, but there they are divided between differently identifiable individuals, largely because they have a distinctly exegetical purpose.

The French practice was rather different. Eustache Marcadé's *La Vengeance Jesucrist*, dating from the first half of the fifteenth century and printed in 1491, has two of these voices, who divide the framing functions between them. Le Prescheur is the principal spiritual figure drawing attention to the thematic material, but he also has a part to play in the pacing of the cycle and the unfolding of events. Le Meneur du Jeu is used more than once to bring in historical detail surrounding the action, and also to explicate the scriptural and patristic authorities upon which the narratives are based. Gréban's *Mystère de la Passion* is of equal interest as a single coherent composition identifiably by one and the same author throughout. There are some variations in the surviving texts, but in general we can assume that this is the work of one person. As a result, the same policies run through it with regard to the speaker, called the Prologue, who has distinctive doctrinal and theatrical functions, which he exercises at the beginning and end of each of the four days of performance. It will be seen later that this practice is followed by Bale, but, as we shall also see, Bale specifically identifies the figure with himself. The same cannot be said with certainty for Gréban, though it is a possibility. There is one distinction between the continental cycles and the English ones which may have a bearing upon the frequency and extent of the Expositor figures. Processional performance on pageant wagons, as at York, Chester, and Coventry, is not found as such in the continental productions. The standard practice in France and Germany was the use of a large space with fixed locations, which were often given a fixed identity.

It is also relevant to note that Gréban's *Passion* originated around 1450, whereas the dating of the examples in the English cycles is a much more uncertain business. The two most significant English examples which use Expositor figures are somewhat later than their French counterparts. The N. Town manuscript can hardly have been written out before the last years of the fifteenth century, and the early sixteenth-century seems more likely. The Chester Cycle,

though it probably existed early in the fifteenth century, has come down to us in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century manuscripts, and these are thought to derive from a lost *exemplum* of 1568, which in its turn had recreated the lost master copy (Mills, p. 183). In all probability, this influential text, broadly similar to the extant ones, which are all later than 1590, was created around 1530 at a time of growing religious conflict, when the Chester Plays were moved from Corpus Christi to Whitsun week, but it is not possible to compare this supposed master text convincingly with anything that may have existed earlier. Because of these assumptions about date, it may be that the compilers of these two English cycle plays knew of their continental predecessors and followed them to some extent, but their practice was not as consistent or comprehensive as these apparently earlier examples from France. In the case of the German-language plays the dating is broadly similar, or perhaps slightly later: the Künzelsau play with Procession is recorded in 1474, with the manuscript dated 1474; at Alsfeld the Passion is recorded in 1501; performances of the *Luzerner Osterspiel* are recorded from 1450, and the first surviving manuscript dates from 1465. It is indeed notable that so many of the cycle plays from both France and Germany began at roughly the same time: from about 1450 onwards. We shall see, moreover, that they did offer some help to the English compilers in the process of assembling their texts, and these elements appear in several instances to be part of the process of bringing together material from different provenances.

Besides these two cycles and Bale's fragments, there are very few other examples of Expositors. It is hard to pin down any such figure in *Towneley*, and in the *York Plays* such figures appear in only two episodes. These both occur in passages which came under the eye and influence of John Clerke, the sixteenth-century Common Clerk charged with looking after the manuscript long after it was originally made in the fifteenth century. In the York *Annunciation*, it is Clerke who has written in the speech prefix "Doctor" for the long introductory passage about the prophecies for the Nativity (12.1-144). In the case of the Priscian who introduces the *Purification*, the text of the whole play is in Clerke's hand, and it was apparently inserted into the manuscript after 1567. It is out of sequence between *Emmaus* and the *Incredulity of Thomas*: it appears between Plays 40 and 41, when it should be Play 17 (Beadle, ed.). We might add that the prevailing dramatic style of this cycle does not make a suitable atmosphere for Expositor-type introductions. Perhaps because of the processional method, there is a preoccupation with getting on with the dramatic content as quickly as possible. Very many of the York

plays begin with explosive boasts by the Herods, or by Pilate, and others have important pronouncements by the divine figures. However, we shall see that there are some Expositor figures in shorter biblical plays surviving in the Digby Manuscripts, all from the early sixteenth century, some of which show signs of having other lost plays associated with them.



In considering the N. Town Cycle, I will not attempt a full textual account, since this has been done admirably by others (Meredith and Kahrl, eds.; Meredith, ed., *Mary Play and Passion Play*; Spector, ed.). But here it is important to recall that this is a composite cycle, and one for which there are no clear indications about whether it was ever performed in the form in which it now appears in the manuscript. Nor has it a local attribution, other than one based on linguistic characteristics suggesting that the principal scribe came from south-west of Norwich. Even though some parts of it are rich in details suggesting performance, there is a high probability that this is essentially a paper cycle. That being granted, we can here set about examining where and perhaps why the late fifteenth-century compiler incorporated Expositor figures at certain points.

Recent textual work has developed a disintegrative view of the cycle by concentrating upon two sections which had independent existence before they were incorporated into it: these are a group of plays concerning the life of Mary the Virgin before the Nativity, and the plays about the Passion (Meredith, ed., *Mary Play and Passion Play*; Spector, ed., II: 436, 539-40). In these sections, Contemplacio has a significant role, appearing in four plays of the first group and one of the second. To some extent, he is concerned metatheatrically with what is to be performed partly in terms of entertainment, for he hopes at the beginning of the Mary sequence that it “may profite and plese” those present (Spector, ed., 8.6; all N. Town references are to this edition). He manages the performance by his calls for silence, by attending to the amount of detail which is to be performed, as though conscious of the pace of the incidents: “We passe ovyr þat, breffnes of tyme consydyrynge” (9.4). Later he says that if these matters were treated with “good prevydens,/Eche on wolde suffice for an hool day” (9.300-1). He also steps aside from the portrayal of events by his repeated concern for the spiritual well-being of the audience. He speaks directly to them in contemporary terms, prays for them and appeals to their right understanding of the events. He does not always tell the audience exactly what they should think, however, and his con-

cern is often expressed generally, rather than in purely didactic terms aimed at explaining the significance. I want to suggest at this point that this spiritual function is the principal means by which he is detached from the action yet remains part of the performance.

Contemplacio also has a role in providing continuity. This is partly anticipating events to come, as in his reference to the Parliament of Heaven, the subject of the next play, which is to follow the end of the *Presentation of Mary* (9.307). But this anticipation can sometimes be far-reaching, and thus he has a prophetic role, ranging over what is to come much later in the narrative of events, even those outside the plays with which he is directly involved. He draws upon and helps to create a sense of design for the whole cycle, even though in the end its unity is problematic.

So far, then, we may suggest that in these Mary episodes Contemplacio was used as a means of managing them and giving direct attention to the audience, but it is not apparent why this should happen for the Mary episodes and not elsewhere to the same extent, or indeed to a lesser one. The only conclusion I can offer is that Contemplacio was in the original group of plays and the compiler took him over rather than deciding to remove him. It is quite possible that this Mary sequence came to the compiler somewhat late, since most of the individual plays in it are not mentioned in the Proclamation at the beginning of the manuscript, where the bulk of the episodes are summarized. The function of such Proclamations in N. Town and Chester is variable, and the correspondence between the scenes they anticipate and what actually occurs later in the cycles is not exact. We can, however, throw a little more light on this by looking at some manuscript features.

It looks as though the N. Town scribe came under some pressure in two places which concern Contemplacio. At the end of the *Presentation of Mary*, Contemplacio's speech follows the play in the normal way, but the rubricated number appears too early, at the side of his speech on fol. 48^r. Play 10 does not start until a new sheet, fol. 49, and the verso of Contemplacio's conclusion of Play 9 is filled up with a subsequent insertion intended and marked to go into Play 10 at a later point. Moreover if we look at his speech as a whole, we find that there is a change in the verse form (two quatrains [9.294-301]; a nine-line stanza [9.302-10]).

This example is perhaps not as strong as the second one, which occurs at the end of the *Visit to Elizabeth*. Here there is an alternative ending for the episode. The original, copied out normally and in proper sequence on fols. 73^v and 74^r,

has Elizabeth end the play with a recognition that the time of mercy is now coming. The revised version crams in a new short speech by her at the foot of 73^v, marked “si placet” and with the catchword “Contemplacio”. His speech, with a new speech prefix (3.150A-185A), is then placed under the first ending on the following page. However it was too long for the vacant space, perhaps because the compiler acquired some extra material after he had started (Spector, ed., II: 466), and the result is a much overloaded page. When we look at the content of this alternative, we find that it principally does two things. It carries out an exposition on the terms *Ave* [*regina celorum*], *Benedictus* and *Magnificat*. In addition, the last stanza contains thanks to the audience for their patience and leads into singing the antiphon *Ave regina celorum*, perhaps as a processional ending to this play. But we should notice particularly that this form of Contemplacio’s speech might also have been appropriate as a conclusion for the whole group of Mary episodes when they had formed a separate unit.

I want to suggest here that these passages may well indicate that the compiler saw that Contemplacio could be used as a means of linking together the Mary episodes and of connecting them with the rest of the cycle, since from time to time they point to a larger prospectus. But if this is indeed how he saw this external voice, he did not use it consistently. Perhaps he did not have the authority or the time to impose such a framework. Moreover, we have another appearance in the Mary sequence to consider, and this is apart from the fact that he did not use this figure to link in one other Mary episode, *Joseph’s Doubt* (12), which is markedly different stylistically. Meredith does not include it amongst those coming into the cycle from the Mary Play (*Mary Play*, pp. 2-4). The much more intense appearance of the Expositor in *The Parliament of Heaven* (11) differs from the others, in that here he is an integral part of the play and a motivating force from inside it. In a highly emotional tone, he reflects, in four heavily alliterated stanzas, upon the suffering of those who have now lain tormented in hell for four thousand and six hundred years, and begs for mercy for them. He longs for the saviour to come: “And levyn erys thre and threttye,/Thyn famyt folke with þi fode to fede” (11.11-12). But the manuscript again shows signs of alteration, for the four stanzas are marked in such a way as to show that they were at some stage meant for two speakers, each having two stanzas each. Their original designation is revealed in the following speech by the representative angelic figure Virtutes, who indicates that these verses were supplications by patriarchs and prophets. The rest of the first part of this play is so arranged that the appeal,

backed by Virtutes, is the start of the debate of the Four Daughters about the need for a saviour, which, in its turn, prompts God to send Gabriel to make the Annunciation to Mary (Fletcher, pp. 111-12). Rosemary Woolf makes the point that the emotional vehemence of this intervention by the Expositor is rather like that found in the liturgical treatment of the need for the coming of the Saviour (p. 168). The alterations suggest that *Contemplacio* was not in the original text copied into the cycle and that the scribe decided he might improve the cycle by attributing the speeches in question to him.

The last appearance of *Contemplacio* in N. Town occurs in the Passion sequence. Here the textual problems are also interesting, since the Passion was apparently derived from two earlier sequences incorporated into the manuscript. We need to look at the second of these, which begins with *Contemplacio*'s introduction to *Herod; The Trial before Annas and Caiaphas* (29). This part of the manuscript is distinct from the rest in terms of paper, watermarks and handwriting. *Contemplacio*'s speech contains a prayer for the audience referring to the Trinity, but its main preoccupation is to act as a link in the narrative. In fact, it reveals that this second Passion sequence was performed on a different basis from that implied, but not necessarily achieved, in the rest of the cycle. He refers to the performance "last Šere" (29.9) and gives details which do indeed correspond with the incidents in the first Passion sequence. Now, he explains, we are going to take the story further, and this brief remark implies that the two Passion sequences were thought of at one time as being alternatives for performance. The absence of background documentation which might enable us to contextualize a performance leaves the apparent alternation impenetrable. The implication must be that this *Contemplacio* is a survivor of an earlier arrangement, as there would be no point in writing this passage afresh when its new position corresponds with the rubricated numbers and also with the description of these plays in the Proclamation.

Thus the contribution of *Contemplacio* in N. Town is internally inconsistent, and to some extent, at least, it reflects some functions which are no longer required in the play as it now stands. In short, it reflects the incoherence deeply embedded in the text as a whole. Yet there is a sense that some measure of introduction is necessary and this, I suggest, is reflected in the use of a number of other figures who make isolated appearances. We shall see that these speakers share some features with *Contemplacio*, and also that their appearance may have some strategic importance in the attempt to render the cycle coherent.

Two of the plays are introduced by devils. The most significant rhetorically is Satan at the beginning of the *Conspiracy* (26.1-124). His long, prosodically diverse speech actually introduces the three plays of the first Passion sequence, which, as we have seen, was incorporated into the cycle as a separate whole. He addresses the audience, but he is frank in showing that, unlike other Expositors, he is concerned to bring about their destruction. He offers them pain as a reward for sin. His own extravagant appearance as a dandy (“my dysgysyd varyauns” [26.65]) is turned into a pattern for sinners to follow, and this shift in clothing is cleverly the means by which the people are themselves to show the cunning and craft of sin. He offers them new names whereby they may hide the true names of the Deadly Sins:

Ȝe xal kalle pride “onesté”, and “naterall kend” lechory,
 And covetyse “wysdam” there treasure is present;
 Wreth “manhod”, and envye callyd “chastement”. (26.111-13)

During some of the speech he recounts his own past attempts to destroy Christ. In these he admits to defeat and some bafflement, but still he intends to pursue Christ to death, an element bringing into play the notion that the devil does not properly understand the divinity of Christ. Thus, although he functions as summarizer and a false prophet, he is also partially absorbed as a participant in the action. It is a bravura performance and one of those places where the poetic language conveys emotion as well as moral significance: “Gyff me ȝoure love, grawnt me myn affeccyon,/And I wyl vnclose þe tresour of lovys alyawns” (26.61-62). It is perhaps no surprise that what he says he has done is not quite the same as what is shown in previous episodes, but in view of the nature of the manuscript, this is more likely attributable to the earlier separate existence of this sequence than to any deviousness on his part. Nevertheless, this speech is a rich introduction to the Passion Play and to Satan’s part in the events it portrays. His ignorance is one of the themes of the Passion sequence, and it is important to establish it at the beginning. His self-display is immediately countered by a complementary speech from John the Baptist (26.125-64). Instead of the way to damnation, John offers the right path to salvation. He warns against the Deadly Sins and offers a necessary relationship between hope and dread: “So these tweyn must be knyht be on acorde” (26.161).

There is a further introduction by Satan to the composite play *Satan and Pilate’s Wife: The Second Trial before Pilate* (31), but the function of the speech is notably

different, in that he does not seek to involve the audience, as in the *Conspiracy*. The tone is more boastful than beguiling, and he speaks with relish of the torments awaiting Jesus in hell. He makes a point of referring to the prophet called God's son, thus revealing that he still thinks Jesus is human, not divine, and therefore destined for hell. Satan explains that he has prepared the cross and the nails, and then he initiates the action of the scene by calling those in hell to make ready for a "guest". But the response from the offstage Demon in hell is that Jesus must not come to hell for fear of the devils losing their power. This becomes the driving force for the rest of the action. Satan makes a u-turn and, by frightening Pilate's Wife, seeks to prevent the crucifixion in what had become the traditional manner, as it appears in the York *Pilate's Wife's Dream* (30). This all means that the opening speech here is working not as a framing device but rather as an opening step in the narration. However, we should also bear in mind that the presence of the Devil in the Passion sequences of N. Town is rather more emphatic than it is in the other English cycles (Fichte, p. 117). This does seem to be a thematic and structural decision. If it is, his introductory role is contextualized in a way which gives him narrative potentiality.

There are two other introductory speeches which might be separated from the action in N. Town, at least in part, and both seem aimed at a comic effect. Den the Summoner has a boastful call for silence, as though in a medieval ecclesiastical court, at the beginning of the *Trial of Mary and Joseph* (14). The speech is a bravura performance of an alliterated list of sinners who must appear at the court and who might offer him bribes (14.1-33). He does not appear again, and there is no follow up to his summons. The play is not part of the series identified by Peter Meredith as the *Mary Play*, yet it is about Mary in some measure. In yet another play about Mary, there is another rather comic introduction, that by the Doctor to the *Assumption of Mary* (41). This text is another which had a physically separate existence, and in this case it is not in the hand of the main scribe/compiler, though he has corrected some items in it. It is curiously inconsistent in tone, in that it begins by addressing the audience respectfully and reminding them of the stages of Mary's exemplary life. But the last stanza is a tirade against the audience, beginning, "Pes now youre blaberyng in the devilis name!", and concluding with a crude threat: "For what boy bragge outh, hym spille I!/As knave wyth this craggyd knag, hym kulle I!" (41.27-39). One can only suppose that this separate textual item preserves elements from another intended performance, and that the Doctor's introduction has not been properly reconciled with the rest of the N. Town cycle.

A general conclusion regarding the Expositor figures in N. Town would therefore be to suggest that they were often taken over embedded in the separate elements incorporated into the cycle, but also that the scribe/compiler saw some possibility of using them as linking features, and also as a means of relating to the audience, especially in terms of doctrine and prayer. Because of the relatively late date of the compilation of the manuscript, these procedures may have been determined to some extent by continental practice.

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The Expositor figures in the Chester cycle are hardly any more consistent than those in N. Town. This is somewhat surprising when we consider the nature of the Chester texts which have come down to us. Though the cycle had a chequered history, and though we are very uncertain about its state before about 1530, it seems likely that it was recreated in the sixteenth century, and the characteristics of this text suggest a far greater uniformity of style and concept than can be proposed for N. Town (Clopper; Lumiansky and Mills, pp. 174-75, 182). This is supported by the relative uniformity of its versification and by its consistent reliance upon the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, a work local to Chester, as a source. David Mills (p. 155) notes the stylistic and prosodic uniformity of much of the cycle, and it is much more likely that this text is substantially the work of one dramatist than is the case for N. Town. Yet the Expositor appears by name in only four plays out of a total of twenty-four, and a Doctor who carries out a similar function occurs in only two, in one of which the manuscripts confuse these two ascriptions. Nor do these appearances follow any kind of pattern or regularity. They can be briefly summarised as follows.

The Expositor appears in the middle of *Abraham* (Lumiansky and Mills, eds., Play 4) as a bridge between the episodes of Melchisedeck and Isaac. It is a characteristic of the way most of the Chester plays are organised that each of them contains two episodes, but only in *Temptation* (12) does the Doctor carry out a similar function. In *Abraham* he is riding a horse. In the following play, *Moses* (5), the Expositor overlaps with the Doctor, who begins and ends the play, in that one manuscript (BL Harley 2124) gives the Expositor some speeches attributed to the Doctor by the others. In the *Nativity* (6), after the portrayal of the Midwives, the Expositor adds references to further miraculous events derived from the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* and warns about unbelief. In the play called *Antichrist's Prophets* (22), the Expositor appears throughout, giving a complementary exegesis to the words

of each of the four prophets. To these we must add the Doctor's link in *Temptation* (12). He preaches after the Temptation of Christ, making a parallel between Adam's sins and the three temptations mounted here by the devil (12.169-216); he also preaches about grace after the episode of the Woman Taken in Adultery (12.281-312). The only other character who speaks with authority at the beginning of plays is Deus or Christ: the former begins plays 1, 2, 3, and 24, and the latter 13, 14, 15, and 20. In some of these, the divine figure is addressing the audience directly, and a pastoral concern for doctrine and salvation is uppermost. In parallel or parody, the Antichrist performs an introduction to his own play (23.1-58).

In general the Expositors in Chester are learned commentators. Thus in *Abraham* the Expositor explains how the old custom of sacrificing beasts has been replaced by the new sacrament of bread and wine. He explains how tithes originated and also that Abraham stands in some measure for God the Father. There is an explanation of how circumcision, a sacrament of the Old Testament, has been replaced by baptism since the death of Christ. Though it is important not to oversimplify, it seems likely that the need to attend to some of these details relates to the intention to defend the doctrine and practice of the Church in the contemporary context. Tithes, circumcision, and the primacy of the bread and wine may have had support from well-established, even patristic teaching, but the emphasis here seem to be upon the New Testament, and the implied stance is Protestant in its emphasis upon doctrine based upon it. A similar process may be observed in the Doctor's exposition in the *Temptation*. The parallel between the sins of Adam and the temptations brought to Christ by Satan can be found in St. Augustine, but the conflict, which is also to be found there, between the mercy offered by Christ and the crueller demands of the old law against adultery is something that, it must have been felt, needed underlining in keeping with the new gospel-oriented religious attitudes. There is little doubt that at Chester there was a need to steer a careful course between conflicting ideologies, and the Protestant interpretation is notably muted. This conflict between different Protestant orthodoxies became much more active later (Mills, pp. 142-49, 163).

But in spite of these significant doctrinal matters, there is also scope for the Expositors to fulfil an enabling role in the presentation by attending to transitions between episodes, or by managing the pace of individual dramatisations. Thus the Doctor in *Moses* explains that the story of the two sets of tables for the commandments is too long, even offering a comic hint that it might take a month to perform (5.41-64, esp. 46). At the end of one version of this play, the Doctor also

links the prophecy it contains to the coming of the three kings, and in doing so he points out that this will appear “tomorrow” (5.451). This suggests that we are at the end of the first day of performance, on the assumption that the performance lasted three days (Mills, p. 116). As we have seen, the Expositor appears extensively in *Antichrist’s Prophets* (22). After all his thematic interventions, he also plays a linking role near the end. He describes the fifteen signs of the day of Doom in some detail, anticipating the last play in this cycle. Before that, however, comes the play of *Antichrist* (23), and the Expositor’s foresight is connected to the coming of the dreaded protagonist by his final cry: “Hee comes! Soone you shall see!” (22.340).

The content of *Antichrist’s Prophets* is closely linked with the Expositor’s commentary. There is no action, and, as Woolf (p. 292) has pointed out, the structure is modelled on prophets’ plays anticipating the Nativity. Here there are four prophecies: Ezekiel foretells the Resurrection of Christ, but Zacharias, Daniel and St. John give details of the story of the Antichrist, which is played out in the next episode of the cycle. The Expositor again takes a learned stance, and his interventions contain phrases which draw attention to his exegetical function: “Nowe for to moralize aright/which this prophet sawe in sight . . .” (22.73-74). There is no other play of this type in the English cycles, but the Antichrist and the preparations for his reign had some currency in continental examples. Moreover there is a good deal of support for the narrative and its interpretation in patristic writings, including Jerome, as well as in Bede, Peter Comestor, and the *Legenda Aurea* (Mills and Lumiansky, II: 319-29). Possibly we are dealing here with material which was introduced into the Chester Cycle from an independent source, and one which owed something to continental practice. As with some other occurrences of the Expositor figure, this instance may well have arisen, therefore, from extraneous circumstances. Granted that the Chester Cycle is rather more integrated than that of N. Town, it is still evident that the Expositor figures are somewhat incoherent. They do link elements in the cycle from time to time, and they play a pastoral role in relation to the audience. This can be both intercession as well as teaching, but the co-ordination of different elements in so far as it is deliberately intended seems more attributable to divine speakers.

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Before we turn to Bale, where the use of the Prolocutor is more systematic, we may consider briefly three isolated examples of Expositor figures, one from the Norwich Grocers’ Play of *Adam and Eve* and two from minor plays from the Digby

manuscripts where the Poeta makes significant contributions. All come relatively late in the period we have been considering, and after Marcadé and Gréban. *The Conversion of St. Paul* is thought to have originated early in the sixteenth century, and *Candelmes Day and the Kylling of þe Children of Israelle* bears the date 1512 on the manuscript. As it happens, the figure called Poeta in both plays gives some indication of the nature of performance. In *St. Paul* he is used to mark the movement from one station to another in this rather rare mode of performance. It is not a matter of performing the same section of narrative at succeeding places, as in the York and Chester cycles. Here the action is divided up between locations, and the Poeta's interventions show when the change is to take place. When the action is complete at the first station, he asks the audience to follow the procession to the next (Baker, Murphy, and Hall, eds., 155-57).

In *Candlemes Day* the Poeta first celebrates the importance of the solemn feast and then becomes involved in a narrative. But he also gives an indication that this play is part of a sequence, though it appears that different parts were performed each year. He refers to the now lost Shepherds play done "last yeere" (Baker, Murphy, and Hall, eds., 25), and later he looks forward to next year, when they will show the Disputation of the Doctors. It is not made clear, unfortunately, how many episodes there were or how long it took to perform the whole group of plays. The performance of a series of narrative elements spread out over a number of years is found in some continental cycles. The Dutch *Bliscapen*, for example, had a seven-year cycle of events in the life of the Virgin. It was apparently performed in this way for more than a century from 1448. It is also worth noting that the summary of events given in the prologue by the Poeta does not match exactly what is found in the following play. Nevertheless, there is a possibility here that this is part of a lost cycle and one in which there was an explicit spoken framework. The events embodied in it might have been confined to the nativity and childhood of Christ.

The Norwich *Adam and Eve* presents textual problems, since it exists in two states. The second, text B, contains an alternative prologue by a Prolocutor (Davis, ed., 12-13). This speech refers to the previous pageant about the Creation, then proceeds to summarize the contents of the play to come, concentrating upon the nature of the offence it enacts, particularly that committed by Eve. This version originated about 1565, and may well have been part of a Protestant revision.

These intermittent glimpses at structural relationships with other plays are more than a little tantalizing. They give us unsatisfying insights into what

has apparently been lost, and they leave us wondering about the extent of biblical plays in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. As far as the nature of the Expositor conventions is concerned, they give us some indication that he served as a practical staging device, and they hint that he was at least available to help shape the audience's sense of developing and related narrative elements.

IV

Three of John Bale's surviving plays are apparently part of a longer sequence of some eleven plays concentrating upon the Ministry and the Passion, composed most probably in the 1530s and listed by him in his *Summarium* (1548). I have considered these plays in relation to the other English mystery cycles elsewhere (Happé, "John Bale's Lost Mystery Cycle"). We cannot be sure that the lost plays were necessarily written to fit together, but it is striking that the three extant ones do conform to a pattern with regard to the function of the Expositor figure: in all three cases, the plays have a preface and a conclusion spoken by Bale himself, identified as Baleus Prolocutor. We may note that there is a picture of Bale in the 1547 edition of *Three Laws*, a play in which he also appears. It shows him bonneted, in academic dress and carrying a book, presumably a New Testament.

God's Promises follows the tradition of the earlier cycle plays by identifying Old Testament prophecies of the Incarnation, from Adam onwards. The Prefatio follows the mode of a sermon, even though it contains only thirty-five lines. It is emphatically Protestant with its emphasis upon the Gospel as essential knowledge for all those who seek truth. Christ's teaching is indispensable for those chosen for heaven. The speaker dismisses "fantasyes fayned" and "gaudysh gere" (18), which may refer to Catholic or to purely secular drama. The Lutheran theme of Christ as sole justification is opened (20-21), and it is recalled in the conclusion (971). The end of the Prefatio gives a neat practical introduction to the actors, who will now show the certainty of salvation.

The conclusion recalls the names of the characters to whom God's promises have been made from Adam to John the Baptist, and it ends with a brisk condemnation of the Catholic doctrine of free will, God's grace being superior to the will of men. The last line of the play makes it certain that it was meant as the beginning of a sequence—"More of this matter conclude hereafter we shall" (982)—though it does not exactly say what. We may well recall that in his autobiographical *Vocacyon*, Bale mentions a performance at Kilkenny in 1553, in which this play was the first to be given in the morning, followed by *John Baptist's Preach-*

ing and *The Temptation of our Lord* in the afternoon (p. 59). However, this was nearly twenty years after the inception, and it is difficult to be precise about the text played. The function of the performance was deliberately polemical, since this was the day when Queen Mary was proclaimed in Ireland.

The immediacy of the Incarnation is picked up in the Prolocutor's first line of the next play, *John Baptist's Preaching*. The time of the Law and the Prophets is drawing to an end, and they are seen as but figures and shadows of the Incarnation. The emphasis is upon redemption and the reuniting of God's people, pagans and Jews. The themes used here do have a traditional ring about them, and they indicate that although there were essentials of Protestant doctrine, some elements were in common. We should also recollect that Bale's managing of this material occurred in the 1530s, when many of the later defining aspects of English Protestantism had not yet been laid down. The humility of Christ submitting to the baptism of John forms a link between the Prefatio and the conclusion, and it is presented as a contrast with the pride through which Adam fell. John's astringent mode of life must give way to the faith, and Bale moves swiftly on to condemn the hypocrisy he discerned in the religious orders, notably the Franciscans, and in the papist priests.

The Temptation begins with the Prolocutor's support for Christ's word and his coming defeat of the devil. But the key theme here is the inevitability of persecution, which all Christ's servants must expect: "If ye folowe Christ with hym ye must be beate" (28). This will be shown in the play that follows. In the conclusion, the same theme of the inevitability of persecution is laid out for the earthly life of man as a "profe or harde temptacyon" (406). Bale ends with a delicate defence of fasting—Catholic practice he could hardly condemn because of Christ's precedent. It must be seen as a "frute of fayth" (430).

Bale's practice, then, is to bring out a range of Protestant doctrinal themes and to concentrate upon what was to him the correct interpretation of the matter which was being presented with different intention in the Catholic mystery cycles. In doing this he may have been influenced by continental practice. Before 1530 and before his conversion, he travelled extensively on the continent, particularly in France, as far south as Toulouse. There would have been plenty of opportunity for him to encounter the *Passions* which were being widely performed throughout much of France. It is striking that he did this in the 1530s, when there is evidence that some traditional cycles in England were themselves going through a process of redefinition, especially at Chester and Coventry (Lumiansky and Mills, pp. 48,

182; King and Davidson, eds., pp. 23-25). Bale's approach to doctrine is thorough and determined, and the framework provided by Baleus Prolocutor gives a useful means of clarifying what is to be learned from his three biblical plays. Michelle Butler has noticed (p. 103) that although Bale's Prolocutor remains aligned with the players, he embodies a marked desire to refer to and rely upon an external authority in matters of doctrine. This effect is sustained in spite of the ambiguity of his relationship with the action of the play.

Bale's moral interlude *Three Laws* was printed at roughly the same time as the biblical plays, by Dirik van der Straten at Wesel, with the date 1548 on the title-page. It is mentioned in Bale's manuscript *Anglorum Heliades*, which means that a version of it was in existence before 1539. Baleus Prolocutor busies himself with the importance of law in the commonwealth, a gift of the Lord, and in the exposition of the allegory of the play. This derives from Bale's reading of the Book of Revelation (Fairfield, pp. 61-62). He explains that each of the laws is corrupted: Nature's by Sodometry and Idolatry, Moses's by Avarice and Ambition, and Christ's (Grace) by Hypocrisy and False Doctrine. But the arch-villain is Infidelity, who behaves like a forerunner of the Vice found in later interludes.

At the end of the play, there is no conclusion by the Prolocutor, but instead a prayer is given for the noble Prince Edward, Queen Katherine Parr, and the Lord Protector. Probably this is an alteration replacing the original conclusion with an update for the new times. However, there is a doubling list for five players from which it is evident that the Prolocutor is played by the same actor as Christian Faith, who speaks the last stanza of the prayer. The third part played by this actor is Infidelity, which raises the possibility that Bale himself played the Vice.

Thus the bulk of the Prolocutor's speeches in the four plays in which he appears is directly concerned with doctrinal matters, and Bale's attempt to use these plays to spread developing doctrines. It is likely that in doing so he initially had the support of Thomas Cromwell, but it is interesting that he also saw advantage in bringing out printed copies some time after the plays were conceived, and that the framework provided through the Prolocutor remained desirable to him. It is also interesting that there were Elizabethan reprints, largely unchanged and unrevised, of *God's Promises* (1562) and *Three Laws* (1577).

So there may be a line running from the French and German plays through to some English cycle plays concerning these Expositor figures. It is primarily a pastoral intention, one closely associated with preaching, and to a lesser extent with worship. There is also a practical usage, which connects, recalls and antici-

pates, supporting to some extent the notion of cyclic form (Happé, *Cyclic Form*, pp. 17, 323). But in most of the English examples the chief burden of such overall strategies is managed substantially by other means.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the material I have been considering here is the evidence that in the sixteenth century the use of an Expositor figure could help in the ideological conflicts of the time. This is apparent in the plays embodying or reasserting traditional Catholic teaching and worship, as well as in plays inspired by the doctrines of the Reformation.

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