

Peter Barlow

**CYCLICAL AND LINEAR ASPECTS
OF THE MEDIEVAL TIME-FRAME: DOES THE VIEW
OF TIME WHICH PERVADES ENGLISH MEDIEVAL
RELIGIOUS DRAMA PRECLUDE THE FREQUENT CRITICISM THAT
THE DRAMATISTS ARE GUILTY OF "NAIVE ANACHRONISM"?**

Any consideration of the dramatic use of time in the English Mystery Plays has to approach the theme with a medieval understanding of the nature and uses of time. The application of a modern view of time would only be relevant to the process of staging the plays for a modern audience with its peculiar mind-set. And while the prospect of grappling with the problem of enacting the plays on a modern stage is enticing, it is a task which could only commence after the task of this paper has been completed – that is, the discovery of the plays' own (original) temporal integrity. I shall be arguing that this is the case, and that the dramatists are not "guilty" of naive anachronism. As Martin Stevens says:

In our time, the text must finally be judged on whatever meaning can validly be found in it by its best readers. Moreover, we must be aware that what we discover through erudite scholarship would often have been available in the perceptual set of the most ordinary medieval spectator.¹

And so, while the plays may now appear to be an interesting collection of antiquariana, offering perhaps delight in the unfamiliar alliterative verse-forms, the obscure archaism of the dialect(s), and the naive primitive religious beliefs, these were all a familiar part of the medieval audience's experience. And in looking at the use of the ideas of time in the plays, modern assumptions must be shed about the nineteenth-century scientific, exclusively linear view of time, in favour of medieval assumptions. The implications of the medieval church's hegemony were such that all intellectual

¹ Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 226f.

activity was subject to the church's theological and political world view – including its understanding of time. Apart from its aim (in common with any powerful organisation) of increased power for itself, the aims of the church were the salvation of its own members and the conversion of non-members to the faith; its world view was therefore subject to the achievement of these two ends. These are evident from the content of the plays (the use of typology being particularly relevant in this paper) but I first want to look at the idea of the *sanctification of time* which was one of the purposes of the liturgical calendar and of the daily office of the church.

The church's calendar treats time in two ways at once. It condenses the celebration of the events of the New Testament, and parallel with that, the Old Testament, into a year-long cycle of festivals, which is in turn condensed into a weekly cycle, each Mass being a new Easter celebration (in some communities the weekly cycle is condensed again so that the whole history of the world from creation to doomsday is liturgically re-enacted daily). Alongside this, a linear sense of time is also used, historically in the commemoration on saints' days, and in a "real-time" application in linking festivals to the annual cycle of the seasons. It would not be a strange concept for the medieval audience to accept the validity of the figurative type in a play in the same way that Christ could share his Last Supper with people of every age in the Mass. Given such a sophisticated understanding of concepts of time, the charge against the medieval dramatists of "naive anachronism" looks unlikely. Anachronisms, certainly. Naive? In comparison, it is the modern view, limited by nineteenth-century concepts of Science and History which appears naive.

Auerbach, in considering the use of a *figura* or *type* in medieval thought,² comments on the idea of combining the theologically important figures of Adam and Eve with the common people of the time of the play's presentation by "realiz[ing] and combin[ing] *sublimitas* and *humilitas*."³ Thus, "This first man-woman dialogue of universal historical import [*sublimitas*] is turned into a scene of simplest everyday reality [*humilitas*]. Sublime as it is, it becomes a scene in simple, low style."⁴ And drama is the one art-form which can effectively make the connection with the present tense reality of the audience: a dramatic performance must take place in the present tense in relation to its audience – "the 'now' of composition and of performance on Corpus Christi day in the medieval town."⁵ Further, the development of the plays from their liturgical origins has involved

² Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), Ch. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁵ V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 101.

a translation into the vernacular, both in terms of language and culture. This is a logical development from the immediacy of impact of the discovery of the empty tomb in the *Quem Quaeritis?* to the immediately identifiable icons of a contemporary vernacular culture. The aim was not a historically realistic portrayal of events as would be understood today, but a spiritually true account. The aim is to save souls, not to pursue a line of scientific enquiry.

With Old and New Testament material hinging around a prophet's play, prefiguration is important to all Old Testament plays, and is a strong idea, determining in part the "choice" of episodes to be dramatised. The classic example of the figurative type in the mystery cycle plays must be the case of *Abraham and Isaac*. In addition to the thematic significance of the actions of the sacrifice of Isaac, the Chester play connects it with the Messianic prophecy linking Christ with Melchisidec's priesthood: his present to Abraham of "bread and wyne"⁶ is itself a figure for the Last Supper, with the play on the subject later in the cycle, and the Eucharist (this is the Corpus Christi festival). Moreover, the inclusion of the Melchisidec theme would also serve to reinforce the authority of the church. The many images and themes in both the biblical story and the plays are seen to prefigure Calvary. Abraham is a figure for God the Father, and Isaac for Jesus, prefiguring Jesus' meekness in accepting his father's will:

Father, I am all readye
 To doe your bydding mekelie,
 To beare this wood [full] bowne am I,
 As you comaund me.⁷

The wood, of course, becomes not just the firewood of the original story but a figure for the Cross which Isaac carries to the place of sacrifice; (a figure both of later events in the history of redemption but also of that aspect of the mystery cycle which will be witnessed by the audience later on that day). Here is Auerbach's *sublimitas*. In the earthiness and pathos of the following dialogue between Isaac and Abraham we find Auerbach's *humilitas*, with Isaac's practical requests for a blindfold and a swift dispatch, amongst many other time-occupying devices, and his comforting his increasingly upset father, while also beginning to let his irritation and impatience show (but who was it who was wasting time anyway?):

A mercye, father! Why tary you so?
 Smyte of my head, and let me goe!
 I praie you, rydd me of my woe;
 For now I take my leave.⁸

⁶ Peter Happé, *English Mystery Plays* (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 136.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

The final major figure in the play is the substitute of the ram, the significance of which could not – with Abraham’s speech – be lost to the medieval audience:

Sacrifice here to me *sent* is
 And all, lord, through *thy* grace.
 A horned *wedder* here I se,
 Among the breeres tyed is he,
 To the *offred* it shall be
 Anone right in *this place*.⁹

This prefigures God’s initiative in sending the lamb of God to be sacrificed for our sins, and makes reference to the tradition that the episode occurred on the site of the future Calvary.

Kolve¹⁰ offers a framework of the history of redemption into which the Corpus Christi plays fit which he calls the *Corpus Christi protocyclus*. This virtually parallels the medieval “Seven Ages of the World” – Creation; The Flood; The Patriarchs; Moses and the Flight from Egypt; The Prophets; Christ’s life and ministry; Doomsday. But Kolve has rightly added the “Corpus Christi – moment of performance.” The mystery cycles are situated within time at the moment of their performance. Yet unlike any other western dramatic tradition their very subject is the whole of time: history from beginning to end. Enacting the end of time is a somewhat daunting prospect, and certainly the York Mercers’ Play of Judgement Day seems more to lend itself to spectacle, with a large cast, tombs being rent open, a few devils thrown in for good measure, and the damned fleeing to Hell. The judgement itself is based very accurately on Matthew 25, 31–46, the main thrust of which is encapsulated in “in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.”¹¹ It would be hard to find anachronisms in a play set in the future (unless you view any play set in the future as a *prima facie* example of anachronism); and the point of figurative typology is that it uses accepted historical fact to address a non-historical subject, so this too would be out of place in this play. But its use of prophecy as the basis for its story was far from strange for the medieval mind. The play, being the last in the cycle, is the final impression that the audience will be left with, and accordingly is a straightforward representation, theologically orthodox, with none of the humour which marks the action of so many of the mystery plays, but with, as I said above, spectacle, and the strong warning of the consequences of ignoring the social nature of the gospel. The one additional factor which

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150 (my emphases).

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹¹ Jerusalem Bible, v. 40.

allows scope for humour or comment is the decision as to which characters join the saved and which join the damned. I can find no positive textual support for the idea of including Pilate among the saved – although he is characterised much less harshly in the York cycle than in the Towneley. I mention this because the re-enactment which I saw (1966) specifically “saved” Pilate. At the time, I took this to be a modern comment, but have since discovered it to be a commonplace of medieval apocryphal legend.

Both the above plays deal with time in a way which is foreign to the modern mind set, but they do not particularly feature ideas which could bear the charge of “naive anachronisms”: in general there is simply no case to answer. The Towneley *Second Shepherds’ Play*, however, certainly could face such a charge, as well as “naive inconsistency of place”, which I shall consider as a function of the same phenomenon. The typology of the sheep in Christ’s crib I shall mention only briefly, and to comment on its grimly ironic touch which if insensitively staged could degenerate into no more than farce, but again provides an excellent example of the combining of *sublimitas* and *humilitas*. The comic effects of the play’s anachronisms also follow from this skilfully achieved combination. The key factor is the dramatist’s use of the vernacular in depicting the shepherds. His reasons for this seem to be twofold. Firstly, his understanding of the gospel is that it is proletarian in its nature, so his depiction of everyday people is designed to depict ordinary people in a positive light. Secondly, when it comes to Wakefield – wool country – the ordinary people knew all about shepherds; not only could the audience relate easily to the subject, the dramatist also knew the subject inside out. The implication underlying the charge of naiveté is that the writer was trying to depict Jewish shepherds and got it wrong. But there’s no evidence at all that he was trying to achieve a historical account, especially as he could more effectively write the spiritually powerful plays which have come down to the present day. The use of oaths by “oure Lady”,¹² reference to the Paternoster,¹³ and other medieval Christian phrases reproduced with varying accuracy, reference to “Horbery” (near Wakefield)¹⁴ – all these serve to create a verisimilitude designed to aid identification by the audience, as well as to celebrate and entertain. Other comic elements in the play – misogynist humour, secrets known to the audience but not the characters, the musical ineptitude of the shepherds – all serve to help the drama work for its

¹² Happé, *op. cit.*, p. 266, (line 19).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 269 (line 104).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 483 (line 455).

audience, as well as having their own significances, such as the shepherds' singing prefiguring the angels', and the deceit of the location of the stolen sheep echoing the deceit of Satan in the redemptive plan. The final note of the play is the shepherds' gifts – a figure for the magi's gifts. In the context of the play's message that Christ's mission includes the present time and present people, the shepherds' gifts are appropriately within reach of even the poorest people in Yorkshire. Cherries, anachronistically unavailable in the midwinter of the narrative, are in season in June!

It is the same desire to achieve an immediacy of impact which leads to the references in the Towneley *Herod the Great* to the (relatively!) local countries listed as being under Herod's sway:

From Paradise to Padua, to Mount Flascon,
From Egypt to Mantua, unto Kemp town,
From Sarceny to Susa, to Greece it abown,
Both Normandy and Norway lowt to his crown.¹⁵

This inaccuracy is similar in some ways to those of the *Second Shepherds' Play*, in that it is there to make the story more immediate to its audience. But it achieves this through a self-conscious grandiosity befitting the rendering of its subject, which was totally lacking in the rendering of the shepherds. Similarly grandiose is the anachronistic claim of Mahoun as a cousin of Herod. Even allowing this to mean a kinsman (in the loosest sense) and a fellow-heathen, this is one anachronism for which I might be prepared to allow the charge of naïveté to stand. But while I believe that the audience could have accepted it at its face value, this was not its purpose. The medieval mind would not have suffered any qualms of remorse at slandering Islam even if it had been conscious of the slander: the important issue was the dramatic effectiveness in painting Herod's character so that the audience's souls were touched by the theological point of the piece. There are some contemporary Christian images in the play, serving the same purpose as in the shepherds' plays of presenting the play in an accessible idiom:

. . . epistles and grales.
Mass, matins . . .¹⁶

And I am sure that the soldiers were depicted as the common soldiers which the audience would know well – many having themselves served at times in their Lord's armies. The supremely significant, and – to its speaker – unwitting, prophecy in the play is the statement that:

¹⁵ A. C. Cawley, *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (London: Dent, 1977), p. 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118 (lines 205–206).

. . . if ye do as I mean,
*He shall die on a spear.*¹⁷

Its effect is heightened by its inclusion in a series of episodes depicting a grandiose Herod and a bunch of barely competent soldiers who scarcely managed to kill defenceless children.

My title asks the question whether, in the light of the medieval view of time, the dramatists of the mystery cycles are guilty of naive anachronism. The answer, as I hope I have shown clearly, is that they are neither guilty nor, in the most part, are their anachronisms “naive” but rather, deliberate and sophisticated dramatic devices. Even where they may have committed naive mistakes – such as the Mahoun/Herod anachronism – they were not guilty thereby, in the terms of reference of their own era.

Department of English Literature and Culture
 University of Łódź

Peter Barlow

**CYKLICZNE I LINEARNE ASPEKTY ŚREDNIOWIECZNEJ
 RAMY CZASOWEJ: CZY POJĘCIE CZASU, KTÓRY TAK PRZENIKA
 ANGIELSKI RELIGIJNY DRAMAT ŚREDNIOWIECZNY,
 WYKLUCZA CZĘSTE OSKARŻENIA DRAMATURGÓW
 O „NAIWNY ANACHRONIZM”?**

Zrozumienie anachronizmów w angielskim religijnym dramacie średniowiecznym rozpatrywane jest w zależności od aktualnego religijnego pojęcia natury czasu. Uważam, iż obok figuralnych interpretacji (tzw. figur), Auerbach przyczynił się do wprowadzenia konceptów *humilitas* i *sublimitas* do dramatycznej formy artystycznej, której nie można oceniać poprzez porównanie, a zwłaszcza poprzez porównanie do późniejszej estetyki. Anachronizmy biorą swój początek nie z niewiedzy, lecz służą wysoce wyszukanej formie artystycznej, skoncentrowanej na efektywnej społecznej prezentacji prawd duchowych.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119 (lines 251–252), my emphasis.