

Peter Whiteford

‘Et dat alapam vita’: A Stage Direction in the Chester ‘Noah’s Flood’

This note considers the role of one of the stage directions in the Chester cycle. The direction ‘et dat alapam vita’, found only in British Library MS Harley 2124, records the blow struck by Noah’s wife after her sons force her aboard the ark, and is typically discussed in the context of the misogynistic ‘humour’ found in other dramatic and non-dramatic texts of the period. In this note, I provide an alternative, typological reading of the stage direction.

British Library MS Harley 2124 is one of five extant manuscripts containing the group of plays known as the Chester cycle; three further manuscripts survive that contain single plays or a fragment of the whole.¹ Dated August 1607 by its principal scribe, James Miller,² Harley 2124 is the latest of the manuscripts; in common with the other four full cycle manuscripts, it postdates by some thirty years the last known performance of the cycle, which took place at midsummer 1575.³ Opposition to the performance of the plays had been expressed a little earlier in 1571–72 (‘manye of the cittie were sore against the settinge forthe therof’), but the 1575 performance proved especially controversial, leading to the mayor, John Savage, being summoned to London to justify the decision before the privy council. Savage provided written evidence to confirm that it had been a considered decision of the whole Chester city council, not just of his own doing; nevertheless, while no further action appears to have been taken against him, any future performance would certainly be equally troublesome.⁴ Effectively, the days of performances of Chester’s biblical dramas had passed (at least until the modern revival of such plays).

In 1609, almost thirty-five years after Savage’s appearance before the privy council, David Rogers celebrated what he took to be the permanent disappearance of ‘these Whitson Playes’:⁵

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And we haue all cause to power out oure prayers before god that neither wee. nor oure posterities after us. maye neuar see the like Abomination of Desolation, with suche a Clowde of Ignorance to defile with so highe a hand. the moste sacred scriptures of god. but oh the mercie of oure god. for the tyme of oure Ignorance he regardes it not.⁶

Ironically, most of the Chester manuscripts were copied between these two dates. As R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills remark, the summoning of Savage and the breviary entry together reveal a great deal about the prevailing atmosphere and public attitude (both of them negative).⁷ At the same time, however, the copying of the five manuscripts at exactly the same period provides equally clear evidence of a desire among some, whether motivated by antiquarian or scholarly interests or by civic pride, to preserve the texts.

Recent editorial work, in particular by Lumiansky and Mills (whose Early English Text Society [EETS] edition is based on a different manuscript), has provided strong evidence to suggest that the five full manuscripts all descend from a common exemplar, despite the considerable differences between Harley 2124 and the others — differences that can be seen at the level of semantic detail, in the preservation or loss of rhyme words, in variations in stanzaic pattern, and in larger structural matters such as the omission, inclusion, or positioning of whole scenes.⁸

Notable among those differences is the treatment of stage directions, which are rendered throughout in Latin rather than the English found in other manuscripts, and some of which appear to have been translated for Harley 2124 rather than to reflect an earlier Latin original.⁹ Of equal interest is the arrangement of these directions on the page: some are included within the body of the text, while others have been placed in the right margin (a distinction not preserved in Hermann Deimling's 1892 edition). Mills has discussed the Chester stage directions in some detail, differentiating material included within the text from that located in the margins, noting that 'Miller alone seems to have been conscious of some functional difference between the two types of information, and transferred material from the centre to the margin freely, changing it in the process'.¹⁰ Mills could be contrasting Miller's practice with that of the other scribes in Harley 2124 or with the scribes responsible for the other manuscripts; but whether or not scribes A and B had the same understanding of these functional differences as Miller, the separation of the stage directions occurs throughout. This similar treatment may indicate some measure of collaboration or prior planning and a shared understanding of the *ordinatio*, the arrangement of material on the page.

One such stage direction deserves further attention. It occurs in the third play, 'Noah's Flood' — in a portion of the manuscript not written by Miller but by the anonymous Scribe A.¹¹ With two exceptions, the stage directions for this play — 'Pagina tertia de Deluuiio Noe' as it is headed in the manuscript (f 13r) — are included within the body of the text. Taken together, in addition to directing the performance on stage, the embedded directions provide a simple narrative summary of the action of the play, derived almost wholly from the scriptural account in Genesis (Gen. 6:1–9:17). Thus, they narrate in sequence the divine instruction to build the ark, its construction, and the boarding of the vessel; the anachronistic (but still biblical) singing of the psalm 'Save mee o God' (f 16r) follows, then the release of the raven and the dove, before the family all disembark. In terms of *ordinatio*, the inclusion of these stage directions within the body of the text provides a visual confirmation of the centrality (perhaps even the orthodoxy) of the action they narrate. Both visually and theologically they are decidedly mainstream.

The two exceptions are placed in the right margin (f 15v), as visually separated from the scripture-based text as is the episode to which they relate — in other words, they are both literally and figuratively marginal. The two stage directions, 'tunc ibit' [then she shall go] and 'et dat alapam vita' [and she gives a blow]¹² relate to the non-scriptural episode of the refusal of Noah's wife to board the ark, her being compelled to do so by her sons, and the ensuing physical altercation between Noah and his wife. Mills suggests that 'material running from left to right across the full page was part of the official text ... while material in the margins ... was of less certain status';¹³ the separation of the stage directions in 'Noah's Flood' seems to offer a visual confirmation of Mill's suggestion by differentiating scriptural from non-scriptural material.¹⁴

Matthew Sergi provides an extended discussion of the two marginal stage directions unique to Harley 2124 in terms of their essential redundancy.¹⁵ As he rightly notes, the text of the play itself contains perfectly adequate cues as to the action, and these two directions could be omitted without creating any uncertainty about the stage business. While it seems clear that the two marginal directions are redundant, that they are 'in opposition' to the textual cues is less certain.¹⁶ For example, if 'tunc ibit' [then she shall go] is read as descriptive rather than directive, it may be seen as a comically ironic comment on the action — then she'll go, once her sons have got hold of her, whether she wants to or not. Regardless of whether or not the two entries are 'in opposition' to the text, their redundancy in terms of performance suggests that the copyist included them for some other reason.

The altercation between Noah and his wife presented in biblical drama (a quarrel more subdued in the Chester than in the Towneley or York plays) has been the subject of a considerable body of criticism. Meg Twycross derives it from 'folk tradition', but such marital strife is equally common within a very long, bookish tradition of antifeminist satire.¹⁷ If, as is generally assumed, the scene is included as part of the play's comic business, and if *Uxor Noe* is a 'highly popular exemplar of medieval comic shrewishness',¹⁸ the altercation is a source of popular humour that has increasingly become inappropriate since the later part of the twentieth century. As Lawrence Besserman remarks, the 'rough-housing ... fisticuffs' is 'no longer considered a legitimate source of amusement', although it should be noted that, contrary to many readings, the play itself only sanctions a single blow.¹⁹

Just as the sometimes violent misogyny of the drama and other literature of the period has been frequently discussed, so too has the typological significance of the biblical characters. V.A. Kolve and Rosemary Woolf consider typology in the biblical plays at some length, noting its crucial importance, not just in respect of character, but as a fundamental principle governing the selection of episodes.²⁰ Similar observations are made by R.D.S. Jack, and (with regard to the Wakefield plays) by Walter Meyers and Frederick Holton.²¹ Typological exegesis has a very long pedigree: as Jean Daniélou has noted, a typological reading of the narrative of the flood has been present from the earliest times in works by the church fathers. Daniélou cites, among others, Origen, Justin Martyr, Augustine, and Jerome.²² The ark as a type of the church and Noah as a type of Christ are staple ingredients of that reading, and Besserman also notes the frequent interpretation of the wood of the ark as a type of the wood of the cross.²³ Interpretations of Noah's wife varied: at times, she was seen as a type of the recalcitrant sinner, but at other times as a type of the Virgin.²⁴

Such readings do not go unchallenged: Peter Travis argues that 'Noah in Chester is not interpreted as a *figura* of Christ, nor has the ark been projected as Christ's church';²⁵ Alfred David is somewhat dismissive both of medieval exegesis, which he finds rather desperate, and of the 'glosyng' of 'latter-day exegetes', whose readings he considers are undermined by the 'comic spirit' of 'her stubborn refusal to come aboard the ark'.²⁶ Indeed, he argues that 'the rebellion of Noah's wife mocks the abstract and fanciful nature of typology itself'.²⁷ Despite these reservations, and allowing for the apparent difficulties associated with attempting to establish a consistent typological reading of the noticeably inconsistent person of *Uxor Noe*, there does seem to be a general consensus about the application of a typological reading to the figure of Noah, and I believe the action of his wife

in striking him as she boards the ark pointedly reinforces that figuration. In this respect, the choice of words in the relevant stage direction is highly significant.

The Latin *alapa* is defined in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* as 'a blow (with the flat of the hand), smack, slap', noting the term's use 'as a feature of comedy';²⁸ the definition in Lewis and Short is very similar: 'a stroke or blow upon the cheek with the open hand, a box on the ear'. In addition to recording the use of the word to describe comic interplay in the theatre, a note points out that *alapa* may describe the symbolic blow that accompanies the manumission of a slave.²⁹ But the word does not seem to be common in classical Latin texts: the online concordance provided by the Packard Humanities Institute (PHI), which covers texts (including fragments) up to 200 CE, for example, yields only six occurrences.³⁰ Nor does the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (which does not cite this use) change our sense that the term is not a common one.³¹

A promising context within which to consider the word exists, however, which I suggest has influenced the lexical choice in this stage direction. Inflected forms of *alapa* occur three times in the *Biblia Vulgata* — twice in the Johannine and once in the Marcan accounts of the events immediately prior to the Crucifixion:³²

et coeperunt quidam conspuere eum, et velare faciem eius, et colaphis eum caedere, et dicere ei: prophetiza, et ministri *alapis* eum caedebant. (Mk 14:65)

[And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face and to buffet him, and to say unto him: Prophesy; and the servants struck him with the palms of their hands.]

haec autem cum dixisset, unus adsistens ministrorum dedit *alepam* Iesu, dicens: sic respondes pontifici? (Jn 18: 22)

[And when he had said these things, one of the servants standing by gave Jesus a blow, saying: Answerest thou the high priest so?]

et veniebant ad eum, et dicebant: Ave rex Iudaeorum, et dabant ei *alapas* (Jn 19: 3)

[And they came to him and said: Hail, king of the Jews. And they gave him blows.]

In two of the three instances, *alapa* is used in collocation with some form of the verb *dare* [to give] making the Chester's 'dat alapam' even closer in its echo of the gospel. Lawrence Besserman, in his analysis of the role of Noah's wife, reminds us of the anachronistic allusions to John that appear prior to her boarding the

ark;³³ more relevant here, Martin Stevens argues that ‘the Chester playwright was guided throughout in his theology by the Gospel of Saint John’ to the extent that ‘in his treatment of light and darkness ... [he] gives a consistent Johannine interpretation from the outset’.³⁴ I would argue that the person responsible for the addition of this stage direction is also making deliberate use of John’s gospel to confirm the role of Noah as a precursor of Christ.

Many interpretations of the play assume that the blow struck by Uxor Noe is simply the beginning of ‘rough-housing ... fisticuffs’, as if the couple then engage in some prolonged tussle, an antediluvian Punch and Judy show. As I have noted above, however, the Chester script provides no indication of this, and the word *alapam* is conspicuously singular. If Noah’s response to the blow is non-physical, nothing beyond the muttered ‘marye this ys hotte’ (247),³⁵ then his foreshadowing of Christ as saviour might also include the figure of the suffering servant that appears in Isaiah 53 and in some New Testament passages. Theologically, each of these blows might be seen as occurring at a pivotal moment in their respective narratives: the ark is about to set off, and Christ is about to be crucified. The moment of salvation — whether physical rescue or spiritual redemption — is imminent and it commences with the *alapa*, the blow willingly accepted by the figure of the saviour. The stage direction may be marginal and the action may be non-scriptural, but the *alapa*, in word and deed, serves to confirm Noah’s function as a type of Christ.

Notes

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- 1 For dates and descriptions of all the manuscripts, see R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds, *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, 2 vols, Early English Text Society (EETS) ss 3, 9 (Oxford, 1974, 1986), 1.ix–xxvii; and for additional material on this manuscript see David Mills, ed., *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A Facsimile of British Library Harley 2124*, Leeds Texts and Monographs, Medieval Drama Facsimiles, 8 (Leeds, 1984), vii–xvi.
 - 2 Three different hands can be seen in the manuscript, the other two, Scribe A and Scribe B, being anonymous. See Mills, *Facsimile*, viii–ix.
 - 3 Confusingly, the manuscripts are described as antedating the final performance in Kevin J. Hartly, ed., *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A Casebook* (New York, 1993), xiv.
 - 4 The evidence, including the quotation relating to the 1571–72 performance, can be conveniently found in R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents* (Chapel Hill, 1983), 203–310, esp. 229–30 and 265–6; and

for a discussion of the circumstances around the 1575 performance, 192–4. See also David Mills, *Recycling the Cycle: The City of Chester and Its Whitsun Plays* (Toronto, 1998), 148–52.

- 5 I use David Rogers's name for convenience, although his father was responsible for assembling much of the material before David wrote it in the Breviaries. For detailed discussion of these texts, see Elizabeth Baldwin, Lawrence M. Clopper, and David Mills, eds, *Records of Early English Drama (REED): Cheshire, including Chester*, 2 vols (Toronto and London, 2007), 1.cxxxviii–cxl and 879–85, and Mills, *Recycling the Cycle*, 52–6.
- 6 Baldwin et al., *REED: Cheshire, including Chester*, 1.345.
- 7 See Lumiansky and Mills, *Essays and Documents*, 193–4.
- 8 For an account of the variations, see Lumiansky and Mills, *Chester Mystery Cycle*, 1.xxvii–xxxviii and 599–621. Hermann Deimling, who had been unable to see MS Huntington 2, the manuscript used as the base text by Lumiansky and Mills, considered Harley 2124 to have a different source. Hermann Deimling, ed., *The Chester Plays Part 1*, EETS es 62 (London, 1892), x–xxix.
- 9 This suggestion is made by Lumiansky and Mills, *Essays and Documents*, 75; but see also their earlier comment that both English and Latin stage directions were to be found in the exemplar, *Essays and Documents*, 29.
- 10 David Mills, 'The Stage Directions in the Manuscripts of the Chester Mystery Cycle', *Medieval English Theatre* 3.1 (1981), 46.
- 11 The folios copied by each scribe are detailed in Mills, *Facsimile*, viii–ix.
- 12 In modern editions, the phrase is often translated as 'a box on the ear', as in Lewis and Short. The word *vita* remains unexplained.
- 13 Mills, 'Stage Directions', 46. While the stage directions are in Scribe A's hand, the layout of the manuscript does allow for them to have been added after the copying was completed.
- 14 Based on a metrical analysis of the relevant stanzas, Oscar Brownstein has argued that the scene of this altercation is a late addition. See Oscar Brownstein, 'Revision in the "Deluge" of the Chester Cycle', *Speech Monographs* 36.1 (1969), 55–65.
- 15 Matthew Sergi, *Practical Cues and Social Spectacle in the Chester Plays* (Chicago, 2020), 1–27.
- 16 Ibid, 21.
- 17 Meg Twycross, ed., *The Chester Noah's Flood* (Medieval English Theatre Modern-Spelling Texts 3; Lancaster, 1983), 2. For a discussion of the antifeminist satire in this context, see Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley, 1972), 138–45.

- 18 Melvin Storm, 'Uxor and Alison: Noah's Wife in the Flood Plays and Chaucer's Wife of Bath', *Modern Language Quarterly* 48.4 (1987), 304.
- 19 Lawrence Besserman, 'Lay Piety and Impiety: The Role of Noah's Wife in the Chester Play of *Noah's Flood*' in *Enacting the Bible in Medieval and Early Modern Drama*, ed. Eva von Contzen and Chanita Goodblatt (Manchester, 2020), 21.
- 20 V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, 1966), 57–100; Woolf, *English Mystery Plays*, 132–58.
- 21 R.D.S. Jack, *Patterns of Divine Comedy: A Study of Medieval English Drama* (Cambridge, 1989); Walter E. Meyers, *A Figure Given: Typology in the Wakefield Plays* (Pittsburgh, nd [1970]); Frederick S. Holton, 'The Wakefield Noah: Notes Toward a Patristic Interpretation', *Fifteenth Century Studies*, 19 (1992), 55.
- 22 Jean Daniélou. *From Shadows to Reality. Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Wulstan Hibberd (London, 1960), 69–112. On patristic typology, see also Daniélou's earlier *Sacramentum futuri: études sur les origines de la typologie biblique* (Paris, 1950), and Geoffrey Lampe and Kenneth Woolcombe, *Essays on Typology*, *Studies in Biblical Typology* 22 (London, 1957). For a general application of typology in literature, see Erich Auerbach, 'Figura', in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York, 1959) and James I. Porter, 'Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach's Theory of *Figura*', *Critical Inquiry* 44 (2017), 80–113.
- 23 Besserman, 'Lay Piety', 18.
- 24 Adelaide Bennett provides illustrated examples of the former from a thirteenth-century moralized bible (Bodleian Library MS Bodl. 270b) and of the latter from the Ramsey Abbey Psalter (Pierpont Morgan Library MS 302). Adelaide Bennett, 'Noah's Recalcitrant Wife in the Ramsey Abbey Psalter', *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 2.1 (1982), <https://doi.org/10.1086/sou.2.1.23202244>. See also Woolf, *English Mystery Plays*, 139, 144–5.
- 25 Peter W. Travis, *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle* (Chicago, 1982), 101.
- 26 Alfred David, 'Noah's Wife's Flood' in *The Performance of Middle English Culture*, ed. James Paxson, Lawrence Clopper, and Sylvia Tomasch (Cambridge, 1998), 97–110.
- 27 Ibid, 106.
- 28 *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P.G.W. Glare, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2012), 102.
- 29 *A Latin Dictionary*, ed. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, rev. edn (Oxford, 1922), <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059>.
- 30 *Classical Latin Texts*, Packard Humanities Institute, nd, <https://latin.packhum.org/concordance>.
- 31 *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, ed. Richard Ashdowne, D.R. Howlett, and R.E. Latham (Oxford, 2018), <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/alapa>.

- 32 Quotations are from the Vulgate, with translations from Douay-Rheims. Emphasis added.
- 33 Besserman, 'Lay Piety', 23.
- 34 Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles. Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton, 1987), 286–7.
- 35 Lumiansky and Mills, *Chester Mystery Cycle*, 53.

