

Review Essay

GARRETT P.J. EPP (*Contributing Editor*), HEATHER S. MITCHELL, DOUGLAS W. HAYES, DIMITRY A. SENYSHYN, MARY ELIZABETH ELLZEY, AND ERIN E. KELLY

Chester 2010: Creation and Judgment

Introduction: Creation and Judgment

On a warm and sunny weekend in late May 2010, medieval drama scholars, theatre groups, and curious onlookers alike converged on the Victoria College campus at the University of Toronto for Chester 2010, an outdoor wagon production of ‘a new version of the Chester Cycle’¹ based on an eye-witness account from 1572 by Christopher Goodman, a protestant churchman strongly opposed to the plays as promoting Catholicism and threatening ‘perill or danger to her *Majesty*’ Queen Elizabeth I and her realm.² What follows is a series of reviews of several notable play productions from that weekend, written by Mary Elizabeth Ellzey, Douglas W. Hayes, Erin E. Kelly, Heather S. Mitchell, and Dimitry Senyshyn, and an analysis of some of the issues of performance, scholarship, and history that they raised.

The final day of this three-day performance and of the four-day scholarly symposium held in conjunction with it, coincided not only with the birthday of another English monarch, Queen Victoria, but also with the feast-day of St Sarah, the apocryphal patron saint of the Romanies. This coincidence of myth and history and celebration seemed appropriate to the occasion, and not just because Sarah — like what Goodman called Chester’s ‘absurdities’ — was first mentioned in an obscure sixteenth-century manuscript, in this case written by one Vincent Philippon d’Avignon. Sarah is said to have been the black Egyptian servant of one of the three biblical Maries who with Martha and Lazarus and Maximinus crossed the Mediterranean in a

rudderless boat to what is now southern France. Every year on her feast-day, 24 May, Romanies from around the world converge on the little Camargue town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer to dress her statue in a fabulous new outfit and parade her down to the sea and back. At Chester 2010, representations of biblical and apocryphal figures, dressed up in fabulous and sometimes not-so-fabulous outfits, paraded around campus uttering lines that were mostly penned long ago in Chester, but in accents and sequences then unknown, and rearranged for a modern audience. Yet even invented histories can be informative and revealing, as well as entertaining. And while we have scant evidence of what Goodman actually saw in 1572, Chester 2010 has left us with photographs and ample textual evidence by which to judge this creation.

The text for Chester 2010 was based on the modern-spelling edition of plays by David Mills as reassembled and edited for performance by Alexandra F. Johnston, assisted by Linda Phillips.³ As Johnston has noted, 'Christopher Goodman did not see the text as it has come down to us. We can also be sure he didn't see the pageants exactly as I have conjectured them'.⁴ That is, the basis of this production was explicitly and even necessarily a modern artefact: a textual version of Frankenstein's monster, built from reassembled and rewritten pieces, and reanimated; or, like the statue of St Sarah, an image of something that never existed, yet a source of real inspiration. Chester 2010 was a wonderful, celebratory experience, but what exactly did it have to do with historical truth, or with what Erin E. Kelly, one of the reviewers here, referred to in her symposium paper as 'stubborn facts'?⁵ To appropriate terms of Elizabethan religious debate, is a scholarly and theatrical enterprise such as this justified by the faith of the various participants in what they are doing, or is their good work itself the justification for the enterprise? Or is it all dangerous and heretical? My own possibly heretical answer is that it does not really matter, as long as it prompts us to ask the right questions, rather than presuming we already have answers.

In 1572 Christopher Goodman complained that the purpose of the Chester plays was 'to retain that place in assured ignorance & superstition according to the Popish policy'.⁶ The Chester 2010 production was solidly based in 'assured ignorance', but this is assuredly not a bad thing. In an article on 'The Laws of the Anglo-Saxons' originally published in the *Quarterly Review* (July 1904), a celebratory review of the first volume of *Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, edited by Felix Lieberman, Frederic William Maitland asserted that

if we owe to these laws a certain sum of assured knowledge, we owe to them also — and this is hardly less valuable — a certain sum of assured ignorance. When they do not satisfy they at all events stimulate a rational curiosity; and where they do not give us intelligible answers they prompt us to ask intelligent questions — questions ... that would never have occurred to us if we had nothing to read but chronicles and the lives of saints.⁷

I am far more interested in asking the right questions than in having the right answers, here and more generally. I am happy to speak, boldly, and often, from a position of assured ignorance — my favourite position, and one that I assume here in order to raise a few questions.

One of the plays that is not reviewed in the pages that follow, but which provoked much discussion at the event itself, was the massive ‘Herod’ play that kicked off the second day,⁸ amalgamated from fully three plays in the extant text. In her symposium paper Johnston rightly called this ‘a major crux’. One could argue that, as a relatively extreme example of textual tampering on a relatively slight bit of historical evidence, the script for this play typifies the assured scholarly and historical ignorance that necessarily informs this project.

Goodman’s listing refers to one pageant, apparently the tenth he saw, as covering content from both the ninth and tenth plays in the extant text — ‘The Offering of the Three Kings’ and ‘The Massacre of the Innocents’ — while the previous items in his list refer to ‘The Shepherds’ and not to the kings’ encounter with Herod. So Johnston edited three pageants into one, cutting 1145 lines down to 905 lines, still the longest pageant in the 2010 text, wreaking havoc on the wagon schedule. When reading the text, the first thing that struck me regarding the omissions was actually prosodic: as in other parts of the 2010 reconstruction, half-stanzas are cut, breaking up the famous (and famously clumsy, repetitive) Chester stanza form of *aaab cccb*; yet the text for the Slaughter pageant retains all but four lines of an awkward section consisting of two couplets and a cross-rhyme along with a few half-stanzas. At first I was bothered by all of this poetic irregularity. The very existence of this section, however, stands as proof that the verse form was not always regular, that half-stanzas were occasionally rearranged or cut or rewritten in a different form. Furthermore, a tendency of productions over the past few days was to drown any such irregularities in further rearrangement and rewriting and modernization of the script, losing rhyme and rhythm. A sixteenth-century audience, more attuned to orality, may

have heard the difference in stanza form, but how, if at all, might this matter for a modern audience, largely deaf to poetry? And what does that deafness, and the need to modernize more generally, mean to an experiment such as this?

The section in which Herod consults with the Doctor in a different verse form, arguably a later addition to what was formerly Play 8, is likewise largely kept intact. For the purposes of this production, were I serving as an editor I might have cut more here, including the passage that states that, with Christ's coming, the 'unctions, sacrifices and rites ceremonial / of the Old Testament ... / shall utterly cease' (10.284–86 in the 2010 text), since it sounds, to me at least, like protestant arguments against 'popish' ceremony. Yet Goodman's list gives us no reason to keep *any* of *this* play at all, or to alter it if we do. As Johnston explained at the symposium, 'It is possible that the pageant of Herod and the Wise Men was simply not performed in 1572 but we cannot assume that what Goodman doesn't remark on wasn't performed'.⁹ Another possibility, of course, is that Goodman simply made a mistake in his numbering, especially if this was the last pageant of the first day of production. He might have missed it, or had no comment and so forgot to count it.

Either possibility would mean that, if we otherwise accept Goodman's record as historically accurate, 'The Massacre of the Innocents' remained the first play on the second day of performance, but in combination with the epiphany episode, traditionally the final play on the first day. The 2010 text cuts fully 104 lines — more than a third — of the latter play, adding four lines included only in two of the extant manuscripts — the strange speech by 'God':

You be welcome, kings three
unto my mother and to me,
and into the land of Judea.
And here I give you my blessing. (9.444–447)

The lines, while strangely articulate for an infant, seem appropriately Catholic in their emphasis on Mary. However, they completely ignore Joseph, who speaks just a little later. Should Joseph be portrayed as less than welcoming? Might his lines — indeed his very existence here — be a later addition? I doubt that many other audience members at Chester 2010 thought about this issue, given that those lines were spoken by the entire cast as chorus, a



Fig. 1. The golden Christ-child: 'Herod' (University of Waterloo). Courtesy of Heather S. Mitchell.

choice that interestingly conflated the infant Christ with the devil, whose lines were likewise choric in delivery. This performance choice also distanced these two characters from all the others onstage, effectively separating 'God' from humanity. Even Goodman did not charge the plays with denying the incarnation, God assuming human flesh. Props rather than fleshly actors represented the characters in this production by the University of Waterloo, although the individual actors holding the props usually spoke the characters' lines. This technique in general proved more distracting than enlightening, despite producing some striking images and highly theatrical moments. At least one such moment seemed to contradict the general Marian focus of the play as edited: given the fluidity of the human actors' roles, Mary, at least as a singular human presence, was effectively removed from the stage when the golden doll that represented Jesus was passed from one female actor to another, while leaving Joseph present, albeit in the form of a rod.

The 2010 script also cut one of two very similar encounters between the soldiers and the mothers. This version seemed to work far better than what

I had previously seen or indeed directed,¹⁰ confirming for me the idea of the Chester text as containing, as David Mills asserts, ‘alternative versions of lines, speeches, episodes, and even complete plays, which made the original, in a phrase that has become memorable, a “cycle of cycles”’.¹¹ Of course, I would have had trouble choosing one alternative over another, and continue to have trouble understanding why closely similar alternatives might exist, and might have been preserved. But I am looking at these ideas, these apparent alternatives, more closely now.

And that brings me back to Chester 2010 as an alternative, more ‘Catholic’ production of the plays, reflecting what Goodman might have seen and objected to in 1572. That goal was perhaps impossible from the outset, requiring as it would a host of directors and designers well versed in iconography and religious and dramaturgical practices from that period, and perhaps even their regional variants. The experiment, in turn, could only have been judged a success by others with similar expertise. The very attempt, given all that is not and cannot now be known, sounds less like ‘assured ignorance’ than ‘self-assured ignorance’. As it is, groups necessarily used what was available to them in terms both of knowledge and of resources. As always in such collective productions, even basic blocking techniques and practices varied. Some movement was highly stylized, but most was more naturalistic. Some groups invaded the audience while others stayed close to the wagons. Many but not all groups took advantage of the towers that were supplied along the pageant route. While the Noah play famously calls for God to speak ‘in some high place — or in the clouds, if it may be—’ other plays do not. Placing a visible ‘stairway to heaven’ at every station encouraged other groups to make use of it, but complicated wagon movement and placement and didn’t tell me much about what could have been done in sixteenth-century Chester using high places along the route such as the Rows or the Pentice at Saint Peter’s Church. Having the towers signify the temple pinnacle to which Jesus is taken by a lithe and athletic ‘calypso’ devil seemed appropriate for ‘The Temptation’; allowing the equally sexy Antichrist to mount those usually holy stairs seemed more problematic.

Groups of course varied greatly in regard to theatrical expertise as well as in iconographical and historical knowledge. The best productions, in my opinion, were also the best researched, knowledge informing ignorance, even where specific techniques used for specific moments are unlikely to have been used in Chester in 1572. Like other reviewers here, I loved the simple but effective show of blood at ‘The Last Judgment’ and the image of Christ’s



Fig. 2. God above: 'Noah's Flood' (University of Michigan). Courtesy of Heather S. Mitchell.

blood as rose petals (borrowed from *The Castle of Perseverance*) in 'The Ascension'. The clever transformation of Christ's banner into Peter's crozier in 'The Resurrection' by Toronto's Holywell Players would likely have incited wrath and comment from Goodman but struck me as perfectly appropriate to the 'Catholic' aims of Chester 2010. While I joked in my symposium presentation that the Toronto production of 'The Crucifixion' washed away years of apparent misunderstanding as to what it meant that 'Christ was pierced for our sake' (see the photo by Heather S. Mitchell), I also found the production with its mix of naturalism and stylization wonderfully moving; clothing Jesus in white at the scourging became a means of binding him, as if in a straitjacket — nothing that would have happened on a sixteenth-century stage, but effective for this modern audience.

Perhaps a bit like Goodman, I saw much over the three days that I could consider objectionable or absurd in some respects. Unlike Goodman, however, I like a wide range of theatre, and even enjoy being offended by a performance, being exposed to the understandings and misunderstandings of others, precisely because such things make me think, rethink, and ask

questions. Were I somehow able to witness the actual 1572 production in Chester I would doubtless be appalled, confused, and disappointed by various bits, if likely enthralled by the overall experience. But I would, perhaps, be less assuredly ignorant than I remain at present regarding what Goodman saw. Chester 2010 cannot, could not, tell us what Goodman saw; yet it can and surely did help us see those plays, those texts, very differently.

Many saw the same plays at Chester 2010, but at four different stations and from numerous different perspectives — both literal and imaginative or intellectual — which effectively means that they did not see the same plays at all. The differing perspectives evident in the sections that follow should provoke still further thought and insight regarding the plays and a variety of performance issues, even on the part of those who were not able to attend the event itself, and beyond the specific moments that are here discussed. Heather S. Mitchell reviews the amalgamated play of ‘Abraham and Isaac’ and ‘Moses and the Ten Commandments’ along with the newly separate ‘Balaam and Balaack’ and the rearranged play covering ‘Lazarus, Simon the Leper, The Entry into Jerusalem, and Judas’ Plot’. Douglas W. Hayes takes on two consecutive, superficially similar yet very different productions, ‘Octavian and the Nativity’ and ‘The Shepherds’; Mary Elizabeth Ellzey writes about ‘The Ascension’; and Erin E. Kelly deals with ‘The Coming of the Antichrist’. And Dimitry Senyshyn supplies separate reviews of ‘The Trial, Flagellation, and Crucifixion’ on the one hand and both ‘The Road to Emmaus’ and ‘The Last Judgment’ on the other. Chester 2010 constituted a new and very exciting creation from ancient materials, representing biblical history from Creation to Judgment; the various Judgments enacted here are not and cannot be final.

GARRETT P.J. EPP

Notes

- 1 See the Chester 2010 website, at <<http://chester.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/chester/performance>>.
- 2 Goodman’s words, here quoted from the transcription in *REED: Cheshire Including Chester* (Toronto, 2007), 144, gave rise (with an interesting change in conjunction) to the official subtitle for the 2010 event: ‘peril and danger to her Majesty’. See <<http://chester.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/chester/performance/experiment>>.

- 3 See *The Chester Plays*, adapted as an acting text by Alexandra Johnston, assisted by Linda Phillips (2010), from the modernized version by David Mills: available as PDF pages at <<http://www.reed.utoronto.ca/chester/>> and <<http://www.reed.utoronto.ca/play-texts.html>>. All quotations from the text offer line references given parenthetically. See also David Mills (ed.), *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition with Modernised Spelling*, *Medieval Texts and Studies* 9 (East Lansing, MI, 1992).
- 4 Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The Chester Text 2010', a paper delivered at the Chester 2010 symposium, *Drama and Religion 1555–1575: The Chester Cycle in Context*, University of Toronto, 21 May 2010.
- 5 Erin E. Kelly, 'Doubt and Religious Drama Across Sixteenth-Century England', *Drama and Religion 1555–1575: The Chester Cycle in Context*, 23 May 2010.
- 6 *REED: Cheshire Including Chester* (Toronto, 2007), 143. See also <http://chester.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/chester/performance/goodman_letters>.
- 7 Reprinted in *The Collected Papers of Frederic William Maitland*, ed. H.A.L. Fisher (Cambridge, 1911), 3.449.
- 8 I admit a certain bias regarding this play: as an MA student in 1983 I co-directed my first medieval drama production, 'The Massacre of the Innocents' featuring Alexandra F. Johnston herself as Angel; I also played the role of the devil, for whom I continue to advocate here.
- 9 Johnston, 'The Chester Text 2010'.
- 10 See the previous note. In 1983, we innocently played both 'alternative' stanzas but were told by editor David Mills that we made the apparent duplication work reasonably well, theatrically.
- 11 David Mills, *Recycling the Cycle: The City of Chester and its Whitsun Plays* (Toronto, 1998), 184.

Playing to the (Twenty-First Century) Crowd: On the Ground at Chester 2010

My claim to an 'on-the-ground' perspective is first and foremost literal. I came to Chester 2010 as a seasoned reader of medieval plays, a veteran stage-manager, and an occasional actor. But the Chester Cycle was to be my first experience of a full-scale early English drama production, and I was determined to attend the plays as an audience member first and a scholar second. I didn't want critical distance; I wanted to participate, to interact. So as the performances were about to begin I grabbed my beach towel and camera and