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Brandon Alakas

Seniority and Mastery: The Politics of Ageism in the Coventry Cycle[1]

Colophons following the two extant plays from Coventry's Corpus Christi pageants indicate that Robert Croo,[2] a member of the Cappers' guild whose career became increasingly tied to the theatre, 'nevly correcte[d]' (*ST*. col) and 'nevly translate[d]' (*W*. col)[3] both companies' plays in the mid-1530s. This date is significant for a variety of reasons. Pamela King and Clifford Davidson note that, in a city known for its toleration of Lollardy, Protestant sympathies were already taking root in Coventry when Croo was commissioned to make copies of the Shearmen and Taylors' and Weavers' pageants; King and Davidson go on to speculate that Croo may have even had a hand in 'Protestantizing' the plays based on certain theological assertions within the pageants that are more consonant with Wittenberg than Rome.[4] Careful attention must also be paid to the relationship between the Coventry Corpus Christi Plays and the events of the previous decades, which placed great stress on the city's economic position as a centre of convergence for a provincial urban network as well as on its institutional hierarchy. Indeed, this period from 1500 to 1530 coincided with the city's economic collapse. With a serious shortage of currency already existing, Coventry's economic difficulties reached the point of crisis when compounded by a local recession, the increasing price of food, a national trade depression, and the sudden withdrawal of huge sums of capital from the city. In light of these considerable events and their impact on the city's socio-political horizons, this discussion will examine Coventry's Corpus Christi plays.

Crucial to tracing the evolution of Coventry's social fabric is Charles Phythian-Adams' groundbreaking study, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages*. This work, which locates the rapid movement toward catastrophe in the years 1518 to 1525 and begins by placing the city's rapid economic decline within a larger context that embraces contemporary socio-economic trends witnessed by a range of urban centres throughout England, carefully maps out Coventry's social organizations by examining the city's various formal and informal social groupings and the

deep interconnectedness which bound these various groups together. Indeed, one of Phythian-Adams' principal contentions is that this tightly woven network of social positions that bound Coventry's society together allowed the institutions of civic government to hold firm and avoid revolution despite the massive social upheaval which occurred in the first-half of the sixteenth century. After outlining a detailed anatomy of the city's intricate social network, Phythian-Adams proceeds to sketch the 'deformation' of this anatomy. While much of his study focuses on and extrapolates from the economic and demographic changes that Coventry underwent during the period of its decline, most significant for our discussion is Phythian-Adams' observations concerning the rapid decline in the city's population – from between 8500 and 9000 in 1500 to about 6000 in 1523 – and a growing destabilization of Coventry's aldermanic elite, signalled by an increasing shortage of its leading citizens to serve locally.[5] With a desperate shortage of both young men to enter the guilds and citizens wealthy enough to hold office, the situation was further exacerbated when the civic elite realized that it was no longer able to reproduce itself within the current institutional apparati.[6]

In this period as well, Coventry experienced not only a glaring lack of 'substantial citizens,' who functioned as the primary force behind much of the medieval urban economy, but also an increasing shortage of merchants willing to hold civic offices,[7] a concern that dates back to the final decade of the previous century when, in 1495, the mayor and his council threatened anyone seeking to secure the exemption of 'p*er*sones... of substaunce' from holding office with a fine of £5.[8] While the reason behind this avoidance of office-holding was its exorbitant expense to the citizen, the effects of evading public office placed a great deal of stress on the city's social fabric. Unable to fill positions within the council, Coventry's authority structures experienced a contraction of membership, which forced a reconfiguring of the city's social superstructure. Perhaps the clearest example of this reconfiguration is the merging of the Corpus Christi Guild with the Trinity Guild in 1534. While the circumstances that forced such radical changes to civic institutions were not unique to Coventry, what distinguished the city from other provincial urban centres was the unique manner in which this fabric was woven together.

While it remains a matter for speculation why both the Shearmen and Taylors and the Weavers commissioned Robert Croo to recopy and, in the case of the Weavers, to *translate*[9] the play-texts, significantly these pageants are not only deeply rooted in contemporary normative behaviour but also reflective of the anxieties of the city immediately following the economic crisis of the preceding decades and the attempts to reconfigure Coventry's social

fabric. The Weavers' play is especially relevant to these concerns since its subject matter furnishes the playwright with the opportunity to explore hierarchical tension within a variety of social contexts. Indeed, the *Weavers' Pageant* represents three different models of gerontocratic hierarchy that, while ostensibly set within a biblical framework, also reflect different modalities of authority in early sixteenth-century Coventry. This essay will examine the different ways in which authority is disrupted and how this disruption is dealt with. I argue that the *Weavers' Pageant* contains a treatment, though thinly veiled in a biblical context, of the three most significant social groupings within Coventry – the craft fellowship, the household, and the civic council – as well as the specific threats that may potentially disrupt the hierarchy of authority within each grouping. This treatment by the pageants also displays their willingness to engage with the gerontocratic language used by authorities to characterize (and mystify) the divisions within a number of socio-economic relationships. While the lack of evidence makes it impossible to prove that the language of gerontocracy appeared for the first time in Croo's edition, the extant fragments of the Weaver's Pageant, which antedates the mid sixteenth-century redaction, suggest a greater stress placed on age. Examining the plays, then, in light of this urgent political context leads us to identify the date of Croo's *translation* of the *Weavers' Pageant* in 1535 as a locus for interpreting the plays and the tension that is manifested among the members of these social groupings.

More than many other provincial urban centres, Coventry was gerontocratic in its social hierarchy; among the most affluent classes in the city, age served as the principal means for compartmentalising society. The importance of age to an individual's advancement in society was mirrored in the duration of his progress through the Corpus Christi and Trinity guilds — Coventry's two principal religious guilds. The strong association that existed between the local government and its religious fraternities is a political characteristic that was by no means exclusive to Coventry. As Ben McRee has carefully noted, religious guilds, despite their primary aims – outlined in their respective charters – of celebrating saints days, performing charitable works, and praying for the souls of dead brothers and sisters, also served the important social function of 'regulating the public behaviour of their members' and thus quickly gained political prominence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[10] The profound interconnectedness between Coventry's civic government and its two primary religious guilds is witnessed by the progress required of a citizen in order to attain the highest levels of political status within the city. Within four years or so of being sworn to their guild fellowships, potential

office-holders from the average to more affluent crafts pledged themselves to the junior guild of Corpus Christi. Records indicating the admissions of dependant youths of the city's elite show that the composition of the fraternity seems to have been strongly biased to younger office-holders. In mid-career, however, the successful citizen would be conveyed from the junior fraternity to the senior, Trinity Guild. Despite the fragmentary nature of the Trinity Guild's Register, of which we only possess entries dating from *c* 1340 to *c.* 1450,[11] it can be determined that this senior fraternity was dominated by the ageing elite of the city, the alderman and more elderly ancients of at least the wealthiest craft guilds, such as the Draper, Dyers, and Mercers.[12]

The significance of this basic age categorization is manifested in a variety of ways. Indeed, one consequence of this mode of social organization is the use of gerontocratic language to confer privilege on elite guildsmen. For example, the ordinances of the Smiths' guild, recorded in the *Leet Book*, begin by affirming that members of the fraternity with the most seniority, 'the Eldest & discretest of the feliship', are responsible for bestowing authority onto junior members of the guild.[13] This notion of age as a distinguishing feature in both the civic and guild hierarchies also appears explicitly within the Corpus Christi plays. In *The Shearmen and Taylors' Pageant*, when Herod dispatches his messenger to proclaim his decree throughout the kingdom, he instructs Nuncios to 'Comand me bothe to yong and olde' (l. 576). Here 'yong and olde' signifies class distinction and stands in for other more conventional phrasings, such as 'learned and lewd,' for constructing class binaries that embrace an entire society. Thus, while Phythian-Adams refers to the merger between Coventry's Corpus Christi and Trinity guilds as 'the end of an era',[14] the union of these fraternities effectively abolished the city's institutional apparatus that underwrote age-categorization as one of the principal means of structuring the community. Copied almost contemporaneously with the events that would so drastically alter Coventry's social hierarchy, it is tempting to read Croo's editions of the Shearmen and Taylors' and the Weavers' pageants as reflecting anxieties that centred on the instability of Coventry's gerontocratic ideal.

While there is simply not enough extant evidence to make more definite claims about Croo's manipulation of the texts as well as any agenda that he may have imported into the revised play-books, the available material allows for some pertinent observations. To begin with, as R.W. Ingram notes, the evidence suggests that Coventry's individual craft guilds accomplished 'much revising and rewriting' of play-books, and, within the framework of the Corpus Christi Play, the city's guilds 'manipulated their pageants relatively

freely'.[15] Changes to plays were periodically made in order, among other things, to accommodate the changing religious tastes of Coventry's citizens.[16] It is, then, no surprise that guilds made minor changes in linguistic register which reflected more closely Coventry's current political concerns. A brief comparison of Croo's redaction of the Weaver's pageant with the second extant fragment, which includes the opening portion of the Presentation in the Temple and begins at the sixth line of Simeon's opening soliloquy, suggests that Croo's text placed a greater significance on Simeon's aged body. Now considered by scholars to antedate the 1535 edition, these fragments permit the cautious speculation that they belong to the version Croo 'translated'.[17] Whether or not this is actually the case, a manipulation of language clearly places a greater emphasis on Simeon's aged body in the version produced in 1535:

> Now, Lorde, ase thow art iii in won,
> Grant me grace, yff thatt thy wyl be,
> In my nold age that syght for to see.
>
> Then at thy wyll, Lorde, fayne wolde I be,
> Yff thow soche grace woldist me sende,
> To loove the Lorde w*ith* all vmelyte,
> *And* soo of my lyff then to make an ende. (207–13)[18]

Nowhere in the corresponding passage within the second fragment is there the emphasis that Croo's edition places on Simeon's age. After Simeon's initial remark about age drawing fast upon him, which is present in both plays (W. 204; frag. B, 25), Croo's text retains its focus on Simeon exclusively. Here, this exemplary elder priest, who laments his physical condition while, at the same time, garners no small measure of pathos from the audience, is constructed as an idealized, senior authority figure. In the fragment which corresponds to this passage, however, the emphasis shifts away from Simeon and his request to see the redeemer before dying. What follows instead is a lengthy invocation to the Lord whereby the material pertaining to God's eschatological scheme is dilated at the expense of Simeon's plight as a pious aged man who desires to catch a glimpse of his Saviour.

Interesting as well in the *Weavers' Pageant* is that, unlike in most medieval literature, the depiction of age and the aged body spans the entire spectrum of popular representation of the old man. In 'The Old Body in Medieval Culture', Shulamith Shahar sets out the various approaches to age and the old body in a number of discourses that range from scientific and medical writings

to popular romance. Although, notes Shahar, discourse on the aged body, as both a symbolic representation and as a physiological state, developed slowly from the twelfth century onwards, attitudes toward age remained equivocal from the start.[19] Age was constructed either as conducive to wisdom, spiritual growth, and a gradual liberation from the passions, or as a time for the development of vices as well as mental deterioration; moreover, in representing the positive and negative aged body, medieval poets, which include the author of *The Weavers' Pageant*, approached the body in entirely different ways.[20] In depicting age in a negative fashion, the emphasis falls on the decrepitude of the body itself.

This emphasis appears clearly in the playwrights' construction, in both Coventry pageants, of Joseph as a cantankerous old man with a demanding young wife, a scenario reminiscent of fabliau.[21] This association is most evident in both plays when Joseph urges the men in the audience to see him as an 'insampull' so that they may not in turn 'wed soo yong a chyld' (*ST*.126, 28) and when he complains that he is too old and thus unable to obtain two turtledoves (*W*.421). Conversely, when depicting old age in a positive light, the body is almost never invoked. Again, the *Weavers' Pageant* follows this model by omitting to include many of the negative physiological details in its construction of either the Doctors or Simeon. The closest that Simeon comes to lamenting his aged body is when he thanks God that 'Thogh all my lust throgh age be worne ... I schall see this gloreose syght' (*W*.596–7). Of the three social groupings structured according to age, only Joseph, the least well-born of the authority figures under discussion here, is constructed along the model of negative old age. While class dynamics do play into representations of age,[22] in *The Weavers' Pageant* those dynamics may reflect not only conventional depictions of the holy family in popular literature but also the relative importance of this social grouping vis-à-vis other groupings that I discuss next.

While the tendency to present elements of biblical and classical culture anachronistically has spawned some critical debate in the past,[23] the portrayal of the different social groupings in the biblical narrative ahistorically allows the playwright, especially in the *Weavers' Pageant*, the opportunity to conflate contemporary society with the world depicted on the stage. Whereas this anachronicity may have permitted a marginal recovery of the past, it also provided an occasion to engage in a form of sheltered political critique. This tendency to conflate their own vocations with biblical narrative was common among guild fellowships from, for example, the lost wall painting in Carpenters' Hall in London. Here, as King and Davidson note, Joseph is depicted

as a member of the guild at work in his shop while a young Jesus picks up the chips; the domesticity of the scene is underscored by Mary, who sits and spins.[24] In the Coventry Corpus Christi pageants, the dramatists also play on the semantic ranges of certain words such as *misteri* and *maister* in order to collapse further events portrayed on stage with the everyday lives of the audience. The visual conflation in paintings as well as the use of auricular techniques, which I will discuss shortly, suggest that it was not only quite common for members of fellowships to project characters in the biblical narrative into their own social circumstances but also that it would have been commonplace for the audience to see contemporary social groupings reflected in those presented on the pageant wagon with only the slightest prompting from the dialogue and wardrobe. While this treatment of Joseph may appear unexceptional since he is almost always depicted in this period as an old man and, in many cases, a fool or a cuckold, his representation does speak to the gerontological crisis — if only partly. Indeed, the relationship between Joseph and Mary can be seen as reflecting contemporary household dynamics and the stress that was placed upon them.[25]

Due to the great economic pressures placed on the household — especially among the poorer segments of society — during the city's recent economic collapse, the relationship between husband and wife, like the relationship between Joseph and Mary in the *Weavers' Pageant*, often tended to be slightly less than harmonious. Because the wife was often responsible for supplementing the household income,[26] the economic roles, coupled with their conjugal roles, may have been reflected in the highly formalised address between husbands and wives in the presence of other people; according to Phythian-Adams, the Corpus Christi plays partake in this 'norm of contemporary behaviour' since spouses addressed each other not only by their Christian name but also as 'husband' or 'sir,' or 'wife' or 'dame'.[27] Despite the wife's subservient position within the household, however, no doubt some husbands, especially because of their reliance upon their wives in supplementing the family income, did not always occupy a position of authority within the household. In fact, the challenges made by wives to their husbands' authority were so widespread in early fifteenth-century Coventry that the *Leet Book* ordered the creation of a cucking-stool 'to punysche skolders and chidders as þe law wyll'.[28] The commonplace nature of this disruption of authority within the household is also alluded to in the *Weavers' Pageant* when Joseph turns to the men in the audience for support after Mary reprimands him for his complaining:

> Dame, all this cu*m*pany wyll sey the same.
> Ys ytt not soo? Speyke, men*n*, for schame!
> Tell you the trothe asa you well con.
> For the þ*a*t woll nott there wyffis plese,
> Ofte tym*is* schall suffur moche dysees. (*W*. 470–4)

Joseph's plea to the men in the audience, especially his aged counterparts who, like him, might have found themselves in a similarly subservient position within the marriage compact,[29] is significant as well, however, since it invokes the authority of an elderly male coterie. Yet, Mary dismantles Joseph's half-serious appeal to an elderly, authoritative body at once by directing him to 'Leyve of these gowdis ... / And goo for these fowlys' (*W*. 477–8). This disruption of authority within the household receives visual emphasis in the plays through stage direction. At various points in the *Weavers' Pageant*, Joseph defers authority to his wife and walks behind her when travelling across the stage. Indeed, this transfer of authority is made explicit when Joseph protests that 'My leggis byn were, my fete be soore; / That man thatt canot go before / Nedis mvst cu*m* behynd' (*W*. 777–9). While King and Davidson point out that this imbedded stage direction indicates that 'Joseph should be even more uncertain on his legs than at the beginning of the journey',[30] it also serves to underscore Joseph's diminished status as head of the family since their initial journey to the temple.

This loss of authority within the household would have been even more keenly recognized by the members of his audience who were habituated to the way power,[31] at all levels of society, organized authority structures between men and women with the latter being in a subservient position. Indeed, the formal division between male and female roles involved the seating of wives separately from their husbands at church, their exclusion from the frequently held dinners and drinkings held by the craft guilds, as well as their exclusion from all craft and civic offices.[32] The only social status a wife was able to achieve was derived from the position of her husband. Although this ritualised separateness of male and female roles is invoked in the *Weavers' Pageant* – see, for example, Mary's admonishment to Joseph that finding turtledoves is 'no womenis dedis' (*W*. 448) – the authoritative hierarchy within this structure is completely inverted in the pageant. As the *Weavers' Pageant* makes clear, it is Mary's status as *mater Domini*[33] that elevates Joseph's position in the narrative and sacred history. This inverted power dynamic also provides an explanation for Joseph's reluctance to enter the temple and his anxiety of being shamed before the Doctors. Realizing that his lack of status, in both

the household and society at large, excludes him from his position as elderly male, Joseph is left with nothing to say (*W.* 1038–9) and accepts that '[m]y place at this tyme schal be behynd' (*W.* 1050). Again, Joseph resumes his familiar position behind Mary since only she – as head of the family – may approach the Doctors of the temple. Thus, while it is impossible to prove concretely any link between Joseph's characterisation and the social crisis that was occurring within the household at Coventry in the early sixteenth century, it is possible to speculate that many in the audience would have recognized a reflected image of the strains within their own marriage – likely fuelled by the disruption of the elder husband's authority – in the relationship between Joseph and Mary. Although Joseph's authority in the family is undermined throughout the plays, the stakes of this disruption are the least significant of all the social groupings represented in the pageants. The comedy inherent in most of Joseph's interactions with Mary is absent entirely from the relationships that mirror those of craft guild and civic office.

Similar to the household, the craft fellowship was an integral economic and social institution whose well-being was essential to the preservation of the city's social fabric. Maintaining a stable workforce was, in the period immediately following Coventry's severe economic depression, essential for survival. Part of the reason for the Weavers' ability to retain a solid workforce is the fact that weaving is a skill that requires long training and is practiced for one's lifetime.[34] Owing to the difficult nature of acquiring proficiency in weaving and the necessity of a lengthy apprenticeship, it is no surprise that language involving the transferral of (craft) knowledge permeates the *Weavers' Pageant*. This linguistic register strongly reflects the presence of an 'artisanal ideology' within the Coventry Corpus Christi Plays.[35] The focus of the bulk of this language, moreover, appears to fall on the two Profetas, who open the *Weavers' Pageant* with a commentary on the action presented in the *Shearmen and Taylors' Pageant*. While Ingram likens the relationship between these two figures to the 'ancient duo of the straight man and his comic foil', King and Davidson gloss the relationship as more of one between 'teacher and pupil than mystic dignitaries', labelling their dialogue as quasi 'catechetical'.[36] Although both readings shed light on the dynamics of their relationship, they miss the more obvious parallel that these figures draw with the master and apprentice of the Craft guild. The playwright collapses these different identities quite skilfully by couching much of the biblical gloss provided by the Primus Profeta in language capable of spanning the two worlds of biblical narrative and artisanal culture.[37] This coupling of personae is further achieved through the playwright's use of the semantic range of the word *mistere*,[38]

which can refer either to a theological mystery or to the skill of a guild (the meaning in the *Leet Book*),[39] to couch biblical knowledge within an artisanal context. The following excerpt deftly achieves this conflation of identities when the junior Profeta makes this request:

> I wondr to here you this expres,
> Be actoris hi, this worthe mystere,
> And spesschalle of this v*er*tu, rightwessenes,
> Where hit schal be vsid *and* in whatt p*ar*te. (*W.* 75–8)

To emphasise the semantic ambiguity of *mystere*, the playwright constructs the second prophet's question more as an inquiry into a specific skill of a craft rather than an investigation of a theological mystery. While his desire to know *where* and *how* this 'worthe mystere' is to be 'vsid' seems slightly out of place in a theological linguistic register, his desire to understand the function and application of this knowledge makes perfect sense within an artisanal context. Seen in this light, the relationship between the two prophets begins to resemble the relationship between a guild master and his apprentice. There can be little doubt that the dynamics of authority within this relationship were punctuated by the senior status of the first prophet. Whereas the hierarchy of authority in Joseph and Mary's familial relationship is significantly upset, the relationship between the two prophets is entirely stable. After the second prophet is fully apprenticed, having received the store of his superior's knowledge of scripture, he is left alone on the stage to communicate the message of Christ's salvation of humanity (*W.* 161–75). Unlike other craft guilds, the Weavers enjoyed a measure of stability from both the lengthy apprenticeship required of weaving, which deterred members of other guilds from illegally performing their craft, and staggering fines payable by foreigners to the Weavers for setting up shop in order to ply their trade.[40] With these benefits, the authority structure of the craft guild was secure enough from anxieties over foreign encroachment as well as hostilities arising among masters, journeymen and apprentices. This insulation from such apprehensions, then, may in part be responsible for the harmonious relationship between the master and apprentice mirrored in the characters of the two Prophets. By the first half of the sixteenth century, however, the civic authority structure enjoyed no such stability.

The disruption of civic authority, which flowed downward from Coventry's aldermanic elite, reached a crisis point at roughly the same time that Robert Croo was editing the Weavers' and the Shearmen and Taylors' Corpus Christi plays. As I noted earlier, 1534, the year that the city's two major religious fraternities were merged, also saw the wholesale restructuring of

Coventry's social hierarchy. The system of age categorization, which served as the organizing principle of the city's social fabric, and seemingly spawned a discourse that obscured other possible factors contributing to the distribution of authority within the city, was severely undermined as the guilds, which were in part responsible for the granting of status, were removed entirely from the civic horizon. The great disruption in Coventry's gerontocracy that may have been perceived in this union and the possible anxiety surrounding the authority of the city's aldermanic elite is reflected in the episode of Christ's encounter with the Doctors, which directly treats the threat of youthful authority in a space previously reserved for those distinguished by age.

What is perhaps more significant is the uniqueness of this episode to the Coventry Corpus Christi plays. While it is now widely accepted that four out of the five Doctors pageants from the English Cycles draw on a common source, Daniel Kline notes that each version is distinct in its structure and 'subtly nuanced' portrayal of Jesus.[41] For example, Kline notes that before Christ enters the temple there is a unique description of the young Jesus as Joseph and Mary describe him as a 'goodly... childe' whose 'lymys... waxith feyre and large' (*W.* 724, 732).[42] That this unique addition should have to do with the Christ's age, thereby further underscoring the disparity between his youth and the Doctors' age, is difficult to accept as mere coincidence and thus would contribute to the heightened emphasis that the Coventry Doctors pageant places on age and its role as a means of allocating authority within the various social groups in the biblical (and contemporary) polity.

While the Coventry Doctors play does share a number of verbal correspondences with the other Cycles,[43] there is no reason to dismiss the possibility that the pageants did not take advantage of their thematic material by linking it to local political issues. A few instances indicate the Coventry's *Weaver's Pageant* made slight alterations in the language of the play in order to suggest more of an artisanal and commercial context than a biblical one. For example, Christ's exposition of the fourth commandment can be seen to reflect, more than any other corresponding passage, the context of the commercial centre in which the play is produced. Here, in the midst of his recitation of the decalogue, Christ states that:

> The forthe bydithe the do thy best
> Thy fathur *and* mothur for to honowre,
> And when þ*e*r goodis ar decrest,
> W*ith* all thy myght thou schuldist them succure. (*W.* 974–7)

Interestingly, in the closest related analogue, found in the *Towneley Plays*, Christ glosses the fourth commandment by asserting one must not only honour his or her mother and father with 'thi reuerence, / Bot in thare nede thou thaym socoure, / And kepe ay good obedyence' (154–6).[44] While the spirit of the *Towneley* version is closer to Vulgate,[45] the language used in the Coventry pageant clearly demonstrates a greater sensitivity towards the material realities of living in a highly competitive commercial market as well as just what comprises the maintaining one's honour within that market – material and commercial prosperity. This subtle manipulation of language, which suggests a concern to link the material of the pageant within a contemporary artisanal context, can also be found in the episode of Christ's interrogation by the Doctors. Shortly after Jesus enters the temple, the second Doctor attempts to forestall his youthful interlocutor by claiming '[t]his besse bweye of his tong, / All secrettis surely he thynkith he knois' (*W.* 895–6). The stress that the Doctor places on the 'secret' nature of their knowledge ought not to be overlooked, especially considering its unique place among every other analogue of this episode.[46] Here, and later, the play utilises the wide semantic range of the word *secret*, which can refer either to a divine mystery hidden from human understanding or the science of a craft known only to the initiated,[47] in order to encourage the audience to read Christ's gloss on the Commandment within a contemporary context. Thus, while these minor differences which set the Coventry play apart from its other analogues may seem insignificant, upon closer examination, they may also suggest a closer association between the subject matter of the pageant and its contemporary political context than has heretofore been considered.

Despite this uniqueness, however, the play remains, as King and Davidson point out, 'doctrinally conservative and does not tamper with the liturgical wording and traditional iconography of most biblical scenes' (29). Nevertheless, while King and Davidson's analysis is largely concerned with the redactors' attitudes toward religion and vernacular education, the play's doctrinal conservatism – figured especially in the doctors' unanimous approval of Christ – has significance outside the areas of theology and education. If considered within the context of a disruption of aldermanic authority, the episode of Christ among the Doctors gains an entirely new significance and becomes, in the process, a highly politicised scene.

Like the relationship between Joseph and Mary as well as that of the first and second Prophet, the relationship between Christ and the Doctors possesses a double significance, with one located in the biblical narrative and the other in a civic context. This episode, more than any other, illustrates how

age is invested in authority. This gerontocratic order is underlined forcefully when the Doctors repeatedly affirm their authority over the young Jesus by invoking the age discrepancy (*W.* 880, 882, 885, 886, 892, 897, and 906). Further underlining this ideal is Christ's own assertion of authority over them through declaring that 'I wasse all you before, / And aftur you agen schal be' (*W.* 917–18). It is tempting to think that members of the Weavers' guild who also belonged to the Trinity guild may have played the roles of the Doctors. There may be good grounds for such speculation since there are no payments noted in the Weavers' accounts to the Doctors, thus perhaps indicating that these roles were allotted to the ancients of the Craft out of honour.[48] More concretely, the status of the Doctors within the context of the biblical narrative and contemporary civic authority is further suggested by the costuming of these figures in many fine furs (cf. *W.* 1033). Finally, as in the opening dialogue of the two Prophets, words are used with a wide semantic register in order to collapse the two worlds of biblical narrative and civic hierarchy. Here again, the range of meanings ascribed to *mystere* helps to facilitate the identification of the Doctors with the aldermanic elite that rule Coventry. This association is suggested in a crucial exchange between the first Doctor and Christ, which reads:

> DOCTOR I. Good sun, thow art to yonge to larne
> The hy mystere of Mosess law:
> Thy reysun canot yt deserne,
> For thy wytt ys not worthe a strawe,
> And no marvell thogh thow schuldist be rawe
> In soche hy pwyntis for to be reysonying,
> For off age art thow a vere yonglyng.
>
> JH*ES*US. E, surs, whattsooeyu*er* to me you sey,
> Me nedith not of you to lerne nothyng. (*W.* 886–94)

Beneath the harshly condescending tone adopted by the first Doctor lies an anxiety toward the threat posed by Jesus. The frequent invocations of Christ's youth that attempt to exclude him from this group must have resembled the hesitation of the aldermanic elite, concentrated in the Trinity Guild, to relinquish any authority to members outside of this senior clique. Possibly this anxiety is manifested in a language centred on age because the idiom, which mystifies age, is deployed in various discourses to underwrite more rigid stratifications within Coventry's social fabric.

Significant as well is the manner in which Christ threatens to undermine the authority of the Doctors. As noted earlier, the principle social groups in Coventry were the craft and religious guilds, and, as in the case of the two Prophets, what separates junior apprentices as well as journeymen from the masters is a full knowledge of the *mystery*. As with the Coventry guilds, age, which presupposes a full knowledge of a particular craft, is what underwrites the master's authority and provides the Doctors with their superior status. Christ's preternatural knowledge of the Doctors' 'secrettis' (*W*. 896) as well as his understanding of '[h]ar mystereis þ*a*n eyu*er* [the Doctors] red or saw' (*W*. 951) subverts both their authority and the gerontocratic ideal that subtends it. Here again, theological knowledge is set within an artisanal register as Christ's disruption of the Doctors' authority is conflated with the recent disruption of the hierarchy centred on the aldermanic elite within the Trinity Guild.

By placing Christ's disruption of the Doctors' authority within a contemporary context, in order to read it as a reflection of the anxieties felt by the various ancients of the crafts, the remarkable feat of Jesus' exposition of the Decalogue takes on a greater significance. As King and Davidson note, the Coventry Doctors, following Luke's gospel account (cf.2:47), are 'astonished at his wisdom and his answers' (272). This astonishment, however, has puzzled a number of scholars. For example, Rosemary Woolf remarks upon this episode that 'in the Middle Ages it cannot have been a feat for a twelve-year-old boy to be able to rehearse such a standard piece of Christian teaching.'[49] Similarly, in the notes to their edition of the play, King and Davidson explain that what is remarkable about this episode is that Christ 'is able to "expounde" the Ten Commandments even though he has not been taught to read' (272). What these scholars fail to recognize is the significance not of Christ's recitation of the decalogue but the effect that his very possession of this knowledge has on the authority of the Doctors. Within a culture whose institutional nucleus is located within the guild, it becomes quite clear that knowledge of *mysteries* – whether they are theological or artisanal – is threatening to the social hierarchy when possessed by those outside the elite. Thus, while critics are at pains to explain the significance of this episode, one possible reason for its importance is found when the notion of knowledge (of a mystery) is placed once again within an artisanal context. In a culture where master craftsmen withheld knowledge from journeymen, servants, and apprentices in order to limit increased competition and maintain product monopolies, the importance of possessing knowledge, no matter

how trivial it appears *prima facie*, must be perceived as a threat to their authority.

The question then remains: why would the Weavers have this episode rewritten, as we know they did, in order to echo the anxieties of Coventry's aldermanic elite? In the pageant the Doctors finally accept Christ and invite him to remain with them after he proves his knowledge of 'har mystereis' through a recitation of the decalogue. In Coventry, the ancients that resided primarily in the Trinity Guild were forced to accept a similar incursion of youth into their ranks after the guild's merger with the city's other principal religious fraternity of Corpus Christi. To the Weavers, this union could only have been viewed as advantageous since their guild did not contribute significantly to the civic-office holding class under the old institutional arrangements. As noted earlier, despite being a guild of only moderate prestige, the Weavers possessed a wide membership and furthermore were linked to a crucial process in the textile industry.[50] Yet, it was the Dyers, Drapers and Mercers (in that order), who not only ranked highest in the order of precedence but also furnished the majority of Coventry's civic officials.[51] Civic office lent prestige to the crafts whose representatives held it,[52] and for the Weavers, who lacked the wealth of those 'tertiary' textile guilds like the Dyers, Drapers, and Mercers, the collapse of Coventry's two religious guilds must have been an event not wholly unwelcome since it may have been viewed as furnishing an opportunity for the guild to gain a foothold in the civic authority structure. Just as Christ states that he existed before the Doctors and possesses knowledge of mysteries unknown to them, so too must the Weavers have felt that their craft – so fundamental to the textile industry – was superior to those of the wealthier textile guilds.The pageant of the Weavers also suggests awareness of how Coventry's aldermanic authorities manipulated the language of age in order to mystify the economic structure that underwrote these divisions. While there is strong evidence, as noted above in the case of the Smiths' ordinances, that authority within the craft guilds revolved around and was ordered by a discourse centred on age, apparently this language was also used by the civic authorities, imbedded within the (senior) Trinity guild, to underwrite their authority in a politically neutral way. The *Weavers' Pageant,* however, draws attention to these two facets of gerontocratic culture, which on the one hand was open to all of Coventry's senior males but on the other hand was closed to all but a wealthy elite. A keen awareness on the part of the Weavers of how a rhetoric that stressed the authority of the elder was being deployed by office-holding guildsmen belonging to the wealthier crafts may go a long way in explaining

not only the centrality of age within the pageant but also the different ways age is exploited in the various encounters between characters. Of the three groupings distinguished by age in the *Weavers' Pageant*, only the Doctors, the group that bears the closest resemblance to Coventry's senior religious fraternity, forcefully deploy the rhetoric of age to underwrite their authority. Thus, in having the young Christ argue with these elderly authority figures before being accepting into their circle, this pageant appears to take aim at and dismantle the discourse which the city's aldermanic clique used to position itself at the head of the civic corporation.

In the wake of the recent economic crisis and the disastrous after-effects of the plague, the aldermanic elite was simply unable to reproduce itself.[53] In order to mitigate the disastrous consequences, which threatened the city's social fabric, the Weavers, then, present a vision wherein a gerontocratic ideal gives way to a more equitable and less stratified set of social arrangements as the Doctors finally admit Christ among their ranks. This erasure of gerontocratic hierarchy, which corresponds with the merger of the two religious guilds, may thus be seen as the final triumph over a discourse rooted in the mystification of age, which served only to obfuscate other social and economic issues. Seen in this light, the merger of the guilds may have been viewed as signalling an end to the ultra-gerontocratic organization of Coventry's civic government as well as the language used to conceal a number of unequal socio-economic relationships. Only Simeon unreservedly accepts the authority of Christ and relinquishes his status, partially conferred on him by age, to the infant Saviour; the Doctors, who are characterised as being more weighed down by worldly concerns, cannot easily do so. Only the character of Simeon allows for a possible convergence between Coventry's shifting economic structure and its move increasingly toward a protestant vision of Christianity. With a reputation for its toleration of Lollardy already well established,[54] it is possible to observe, through Simeon, how the play stages a destabilization of society in *both* a socio-political and a religious context. Immediately preceding Christ's encounter with the Doctors, Simeon's reception of the infant Jesus and his parents creates an ideal tableaux which only further emphasises the failures of the Doctors, the repositories of ecclesiastical (and civic) power. Unlike the Doctors, Simeon appears disconnected from the hierarchical authority structures of the church and, although Joseph refers to him once as a 'gentill bysschope' (*W*. 647), Simeon himself goes out of his way to obfuscate the dynamics of authority which exist between the various characters on stage by referring to them all as 'fryndis dere' (*W*. 684). While nothing explicitly protestant appears in Simeon's words or actions, the fact

that he is set immediately beside the worldly Doctors cannot but encourage audiences, especially those in the 1530s, to see each figure as embodying (what were popularly held as) protestant principles and the interests of a corrupt Catholic clergy, respectively.[55] In these ways we may see how plays such as the *Weaver's Pageant* could be rewritten to observe contemporary political concerns in a specific locale. In the case of this play, we can read it as serving as a warning bell to both the political and religious hierarchies of authority in Coventry. Like the city's ecclesiastical establishment and like the city's aldermanic elite, the Doctors of the *Weavers' Pageant* must realize that the institutional arrangements, which deployed a language that mystified age in order to privilege society's 'ancients', were being swept aside, and in the various social groupings portrayed in the pageants we can catch a glimpse of the anxiety and, possibly, the anticipation that accompanied this massive upheaval within Coventry's civic culture.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Margaret Pappano for her many suggestions and willingness to re-read this paper at its various stages. I would also like to thank Deanna Mason for her criticism and tireless assistance over the long course of revising earlier drafts of the present work.

2 For a useful biographical sketch of Robert Croo, see R.W. Ingram, 'To find the players and all that longeth therto': Notes on the Production of Medieval Drama in Coventry', *The Elizabethan Theatre* 5 (1973), 25–9.

3 All subsequent quotations from *The Pageant of the Shearmen Taylors* and *The Weaver's Pageant*, which will be signalled *ST* and *W* respectively, are taken from Pamela M. King and Clifford Davidson (eds), *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* (Kalamazoo, 2000).

4 King and Davidson (eds), *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 5; See also Pamela M. King, 'Faith, Reason and the Prophets' Dialogue in the Coventry Pageant of the Shearmen and Taylors,' *Philosophy and History*, James Redmond (ed) (Cambridge, 1990), 37–46.

5 See especially Charles Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 281 and 47 respectively.

6 While no explicit evidence of a policy or strategy exists of the city's ruling elders to reproduce itself, Mary Dormer Harris argues that the omnipotence of the aldermanic elite was ensured by the mayor's selection of candidates to fill the

body of twenty four jurats 'with due regard to seniority from among members of the official class'. See Mary Dormer Harris (ed), *Leet Book*, EETS, OS 134, 135, 138 and 146 (London, 1907–13), xxii.

7 Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 47. See also W.G. Hoskins, *Provincial England: Essays in Social and Economic History* (London, 1976), 73 which notes that in the years between 1523 and 1527 over a quarter of the tax due in this period was paid by only three men.

8 *Leet Book*, 568.

9 King and Davidson (eds), *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 148. While exact extent of Croo's revisions can never be known, the word *translate* does suggest a greater involvement with the text than one that was, say, newly copied.

10 In 'Religious Gilds and Civic Order: The Case of Norwich in the Late Middle Ages.' *Speculum* 67.1 (1992), Ben McRee also provides a useful list of material that traces the 'shadow ties' which bound, in some form or another, religious guilds to urban governments in such towns as Wisbech, Stratford, Salisbury, Gloucester, Lichfield, Leicester, and Ludlow (70, 72–3).

11 See Mary Dormer Harris (ed), *The Register of the Guild of the Holy Trinity, St. Mary, St. John the Baptist, and St. Katherine of Coventry*, Dugdale Society XIII (London: 1935), x.

12 Phythian-Adams bases this claim on calculations made from the account books of the Cappers and Feltmakers' Company MSS; see note 6 in 'Ceremony and the citizen: The communal year at Coventry 1450–1550,' *Crisis and order in English towns, 1500–1700: essays in urban history*, Peter Clark and Paul Slacks (eds) (London 1972). We know, based on the extant portion of the Trinity Guild's Register, that that the most populous guilds were the Drapers, Mercers and Dyers. The information summarized below for reconstructing Coventry's gerontocratic social fabric was taken from Phythian-Adams' 'Ceremony and the citizen: The communal year at Coventry 1450–1550,' as well as Phythian-Adams' *Desolation of a City*.

13 *Leet Book*, 743.

14 Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 269.

15 See Ingram, '"To find the players and all that longeth therto"', 34.

16 See Ingram, 'To find the players and all that longeth therto', 33.

17 Hardin Craig (ed), *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, EETS ES 137 (London, 1902), xxxviii. In his introduction to the EETS edition of the Coventry Corpus Christi plays, Craig further grounds this claim in the fact that Sharp 'seems to have found no entries in the account-book which pointed to the making of another play-book' after Croo's edition (xxxviii). It is also worth noting that

Ingram, in 'To find the players and all that longeth therto', points out that the only other evidence for an alteration to the play can be found in records dating from 1549 (34).

18 The text of the two extant fragments of the Weaver's Pageant is taken from Appendix 1 of King and Davidson's edition of *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*.

19 Shulamith Shahar, 'The old body in medieval culture', *Framing Medieval Bodies*, Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (eds) (Manchester, 1994), 160.

20 Shahar, 'The old body in medieval culture',160.

21 See further King and Davidson's discussion in *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 16–17 and 27–8.

22 For example, Shulamith Shahar points out that the cessation of the menstrual flow affected women differently depending on the social class to which they belonged. Writers claimed the destructive results attributed to the physiological change were manifested primarily among old women from the poorer classes. The theory being, according to one work attributed to Alfred the Great, that poor women, who lived on nothing but coarse meat increased 'the retention of evil humours' and could no longer eliminate superfluous matter after menopause (163).

23 For a more recent discussion of anachronism in the Middle Ages see Peter Burke, 'The Sense of Anachronism from Petrarch to Poussin', *Time in the Medieval World*, Chris Humphrey and W.M. Ormand (eds) (Bury St Edmunds, 2001): 157–73.

24 *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 28. See also Davidson, *Technology, Guilds, and Early English Drama*, 67, 69, fig. 68.

25 See further Theresa Coletti 'Purity and Danger: The Paradox of Mary's Body and the En-gendering of the Infancy Narrative in English Mystery Cycles,' *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (eds) (Philadelphia, 1993).

26 For example, the *Leet Book* records women occupying a variety positions including fish-wives, ale-wives, candle-makers and at least one cake-baker (646, 688, 801, 555, and 723). As well women also were involved in thread-making, spinning, and knitting (cf. *Leet* 658).

27 Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 89. Phythian-Adams further supports his case for the pervasive tensions that existed among married couples by citing Julian Nethermill's testamentary wishes concerning his wife's actions after his death, which convey his open distrust of her (89, n51).

28 *Leet Book*, 59. See further *Leet Book*, 186 and 188.

29 The commonplace nature of Joseph's sentiment is corroborated in 'Le Court de Baron,' in which a man recalls that his wife, confined to her bed for one month and able to eat only 'what she fancied,' sent him to catch perch; see P.J.P Goldberg's *Women in England: c.1275–1525*, (Manchester, 1995), 133.
30 King and Davidson (eds), *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 265.
31 By power I have here in mind the Foucauldian use of the term as something that is diffused throughout social institutions and that produces the very categories, desires, and actions it strives to regulate. See further, Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*, (New York, 1980).
32 Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 90.
33 See for instance Luke 1:45.
34 See, for example, King and Davidson, *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 20.
35 See Sarah Beckwith 'Making the World in York and the York Cycle', *Framing Medieval Bodies*, Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (eds) (Manchester, 1994), 254–76, esp. 265.
36 R.W. Ingram, '"Pleying geire accustumed belongyng & necessarie": guild records and pageant production at Coventry', *Records of Early English Drama: Proceedings of the First Colloquium at Erindale College, University of Toronto 31 August – 3 September 1978*, Joanna Dutka (ed) (Toronto, 1979), 70; King and Davidson (eds), *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 18.
37 It remains, however, a matter for speculation as to whether the customs or any other aspect of the staging further suggested a collapsing of identities between prophet and guild member.
38 *The Middle English Dictionary* offers the following definitions for the word. 1a: 'Hidden symbolism, doctrine, or spiritual significance in matters of religion; mystical truth' (593), and, under the second entry, (a) 'Ministry, office, service;' (b) 'a handicraft, an art;' (c) 'a guild' (594). For a brief but useful discussion of *mystere* as denoting a craft and a guild itself see Margaret R. Sommers 'The 'Misteries' of Property: Relationality, Rural-Industrialization, and Community in Chartist Narratives', *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, John Brewer and Susan Staves (eds) (London, 1995), 62–91; esp. 72–3.
39 See, for example, the memorandum dated 12 January 1495 which states that the 'ffeliship & mysterye of Bouchou*rs*' contribute money to the Whittawers' pageant (*Leet Book*, 559).
40 In *Desolation of a City*, Phythian-Adams notes that, whereas only 26s. 8d. was expected from their own apprentices for setting up, £60 was expected from outsiders (46).

41 Daniel Kline, 'Structure, Characterization, and the New Community in Four Plays of Jesus and the Doctors,' *Comparative Drama* 26 (1992–1993), 344.
42 Kline, 'Structure, Characterization, and the New Community,' 352.
43 For a useful summery of correspondences between the Doctor's pageant of Coventry, York, Towneley, and Chester, see Craig (ed), *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, xxviii–xxxiv.
44 This quotation is taken from Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley (eds), *The Towneley Plays*, EETS SS 13 (Oxford, 1994).
45 Exodus 20:12 reads 'honora patrem tuum et matrem tuam, ut sis longaevus super terram, quam Dominus Deus tuus dabit tibi.' See also Deuteronomy 5:16.
46 Unlike the versions that appear in Chester, Towneley or York, the episode performed at Coventry also encourages the audience to link the material within the play to an immediate civic context. Other versions of this line are as follows: '[h]e wenys he kens more then he knawys' (*Towneley*, 66), '[h]e wenes he kens more than we knawes' (90), Lucy Toulmin Smith (ed), *York Mystery Plays*, (London, 1885).); '[h]ee weenes hee kennes more then hee knowes' (33), R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills (eds), *The Chester Cycle*, EETS SS 3 (London, 1974).
47 These are, in fact, the definitions given for senses *b* and *c* in the *Middle English Dictionary*.
48 See Ingram, 'Pleying geire accustumed belongyng & necessarie', 71.
49 Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley, 1972), 213.
50 King and Davidson (eds), *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 20.
51 Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the citizen,' 63. This observation may also be corroborated by the fact that between 1420 and 1468 the office of mayor was monopolized by the Drapers Mercers, and Dyers, save only once in 1458 when the office was occupied by Guy Wyston, a fishmonger. See Mary Dormer Harris (ed), *The Register of the Guild of the Holy Trinity, St. Mary, St. John the Baptist, and St. Katherine of Coventry*, Appendix 1.
52 Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the citizen,' 63.
53 Cf. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 281.
54 See, for example, John Fines, 'Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield, 1511–12', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 14 (1963): 162–3, as well as *Lollards of Coventry 1486–1522*, Shannon McSheffrey and Norman Tanner (eds) (Cambridge 2003).
55 For a useful discussion of the ways in which Protestantism infiltrated the civic religious drama in Coventry during the latter half of the sixteenth century, see

Paul Whitfield White, 'Reforming Mysteries' End: A New Look at Protestant Intervention in English Provincial Drama,' *Journal of Medieval and early Modern Studies* 29 1 (1999), 121–47.