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The Borrowed Expositor

Of all medieval drama, the Chester cycle is most closely associated with presenters. These recurring figures (Expositor, Doctour, Preco and Nuntius), which occur in *Abraham*, *Moses*, *Salutation and Nativity*, *Temptation*, *Anti-christ's Prophets*, and the H-manuscript version of *Balaam*, are a defining characteristic of the cycle, and the significance, function, and meaning of these figures have been a source of considerable debate. While early work on Chester argued that the presenters were an unsophisticated technique and thus indicative of the oldest parts of the cycle, more recent work has argued that Expositors were incorporated into the cycle during early sixteenth-century revisions in order to facilitate the inclusion of material from *A Stanzaic Life of Christ* and the *Legendea Aurea*. However, while this research has made a plausible case for the *why* and *when* of the Expositors' entry into the Chester cycle, it has left largely unconsidered the *how* and *wherefrom* elements; that is, from whence did the Chester reviser derive this figure? Such a question might seem at first glance to be unnecessary – one might assume that presenters are merely a 'tool' commonly available in medieval dramaturgy – but the problem is more complicated than it first appears. Presenters with the type of names and functions exhibited by those in the Chester cycle are, in fact, utterly absent from English cycle drama until their appearance in Chester in the early sixteenth century. However, they occur frequently in non-cycle plays before then. The incorporation of these figures into the Chester cycle is in fact part of a larger pattern of significant innovation seen in the cycle's sixteenth-century revisions, revisions which as a whole are in turn part of a wider pattern of rethinking and retooling of cycle plays in the sixteenth century.

Earlier scholars asserted that the Expositor and other such figures were a primitive dramatic technique originally present throughout the Chester cycle but later removed in some portions in favor of more sophisticated methods. In his 1945 *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages*, E.K. Chambers says,

I have an impression that behind the Chester cycle, as it has come down to us, lies a play of a more primitive type, the themes of which have been rather clumsily incorporated, with the result that discrepancies have been left in the action, which the late transcribers of the text have variously attempted to remove. The influence of the old play is clearest in those scenes in which an *Expositor*, also called *Preco*, *Doctor*, *Nuntius* or Messenger, comments to the 'Lordings' of the audience on the significance of the topics represented.¹

Chambers assumes that the presenter figures are an amateurish unsophisticated technique and hence a remnant of the oldest parts of the play. Similarly, in 1955, F.M. Salter, speculating about what the earliest performances of Chester might have entailed, says, 'It is probable that a single long play was produced, for the appearance of the Doctor or Interpreter in play after play of the late series suggests an original single work'.² For Chambers and Salter, presenters by definition are a primitive dramatic technique, and hence their presence in a segment of the Chester cycle is sufficient to demonstrate its antiquity.

This line of reasoning was turned on its head by Peter W. Travis in his 1982 *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle*. Travis takes as his starting point Lawrence Clopper's 1978 watershed article, 'The History and Development of the Chester Cycle', in which Clopper shows that '[t]aken together, the evidence demonstrates that the Old Testament and Nativity sequences of the Chester cycle underwent considerable growth through addition and revision during the period 1505–32 and possibly within the decade 1521–32. [...] The content, the shape, and the techniques of production which we associate with the plays at Chester, therefore, are early sixteenth century rather than medieval in date.'³ Clopper asserts that the number and subject matter of the plays were significantly altered during this period, going from a fifteenth-century 'Corpus Christi play [that] was more a Passion play than a cycle'⁴ to a fully developed set of old and new testament plays that told the story of mankind from creation to last judgment. He also argues that '[t]he most significant change during the hundred years from 1422 to 1532 may have been the one which resulted in the practice of referring to the "play" as the "plays"⁵, suggesting that the conception of this drama has changed from a singular work to a set of related plays.⁶ The Banns, first 'Early' and then 'Late', are likewise added to the cycle during the sixteenth-century revisions. The performance method changed as well, from a stationary production to movable wagon-based performance.⁷ Also during this period the performance time changed from Corpus Christi to Whitsuntide, and from a one-day to a

three-day format. Clopper shows the enormity of the changes that the Chester cycle underwent during its sixteenth-century revisions.

Travis, building upon Clopper's work, argues that the plays in which the Expositor appears (IV, V, VI, XII, and XXII) were among those revised significantly during the early sixteenth century, and that the Expositor figures were added at this time. This finding, of course, is the exact opposite of what Chambers and Salter took the presence of the Expositor to indicate, as Travis notes: 'Chambers and Salter were therefore correct in assuming that the Expositor is an accurate indication of one layer of composition, but this layer I have determined was not the cycle's earliest; rather, in the early sixteenth century it constituted part of what was a major transformation of a kind of Passion play into a full-scale history-of-the-world cycle.'⁸ Travis also demonstrates that the Expositor figures were incorporated into plays in which the reviser also included material from *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*. However, Travis makes no assertion as to where the Chester reviser adopted this figure from, working from the apparent assumption that the presenter technique would be commonly available in medieval cycle dramaturgy. In addition, Travis' assessment makes no mention of another set of special personage figures in Chester, Messengers, leaving us to wonder whether his argument about when and why Expositors come into Chester applies to these figures as well. As helpful as Travis' argument is in furthering our understanding of the role of the Expositor in the Chester cycle, questions thus remained unanswered.

Similarly, in his 1975 *Expository Voices in Medieval Drama*, Jorg O. Fichte concurs that the Expositor figure comes into the Chester cycle as a way to incorporate material from *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*, and, most likely, the *Legenda Aurea* as well. Fichte leaves almost entirely unconsidered, however, the question of where the Chester author/redactor derives this figure from, saying merely that '[this] evidence leads to the conclusion that the playwright of the *Chester Cycle* probably invented the character Expositor, in order to incorporate the non-dramatic material he took over from *A Stanzaic Life of Christ* and the *Legenda Aurea*.'⁹ But it seems reasonable that before concluding that the Chester reviser 'invents' this figure, we should consider the possibility that he made use of a technique he found elsewhere. Presumably if the Chester reviser could locate a suitable technique to adapt for his purposes, he would do so before being pressed into 'inventing' one.¹⁰

The presenter-figures found in the non-cycle drama were easily at hand, but that in itself cannot be taken to imply that they are necessarily the source of the Chester reviser's inspiration for his presenters; he might have located a suitable model elsewhere. Chambers and Fichte both point out that conti-

mental drama contains analogs of the figure. Chambers comments that the Chester 'Expositor looks very much like the Riga *interpretes*'¹¹, while Fichte expresses surprise at 'the small number of expositors in English medieval drama ... especially when compared to the great number of such figures in the French and German plays'.¹² In neither case, however, is the point pressed any further; the correlation is noted, but no argument is made as to what causal relationship, if any, might be found between continental and English expositors. In her 1998 dissertation, *The Genealogy of the Chester Expositor*,¹³ Margaret Tanner argues that the figure has correspondences with other 'choric' figures in other English medieval drama and with late medieval preachers, but argues that the Chester Expositor derives most immediately from the voice of the narrator of *The Stanzaic Life of Christ*. Her position thus ultimately aligns with Travis' and Fichte's, who similarly locate the source of the Expositor in the Chester reviser's incorporation of this material. Curiously, Tanner dismisses without argument the possibility that the Expositor is modeled on other presenter figures in medieval English drama: 'Though the Expositor has relations in other plays, he does not descend from any of them; his most immediate ancestor is the narrator of the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, and even that does not fully explain his characteristics.'¹⁴

Another potential source for the Chester presenters is classical drama. While a full discussion of the complex presence of classical drama in England in the middle ages and early renaissance, and its potential influence upon English drama, is beyond the scope of this paper, we should consider the possibility that the Chester reviser drew his model of a non-narrative exposition figure from such classical drama as was available to him. As Marie Axton describes, examples of classical drama were known throughout the middle ages and were studied as models of Latin composition;¹⁵ what is unclear is how much, if at all, these plays also provoked or engaged minds in the middle ages as dramatic productions or provided models for revising or composing English drama. By the early sixteenth century, classical drama was demonstrably beginning to be thought of in that way; the 'earliest Tudor performance of Terence' took place in Cambridge 1510/11,¹⁶ and an English translation of Terence's *The Andria* 'was made in the late 15th or early 16th century'.¹⁷ Plays written in Latin, rather than merely performances of surviving classical plays, are recorded as early as 1525, but it is not until the mid-sixteenth century that plays were being written in an explicitly classical model; that is, new plays, in Latin, about classical subject matter.¹⁸ By the 1550s and 1560s, English translations of classical plays were also becoming much more numerous. If the Chester presenters are early sixteenth-century additions, it is

unlikely that they are derived in any large measure from the influence of classical drama; exposure to classical drama seems too limited until well into the sixteenth century to account for them, particularly when compared to that of non-cycle English drama, the pervasiveness of which we have only recently begun to grasp through the work of the REED project.¹⁹

But it seems unnecessary, and unrealistic, to suggest that dramatic and literary influence is strictly a binary operation. Possibly the presence of expositor-figures in continental drama contributes to the creation and dissemination of a dramaturgy that allows for their existence in English drama as well. Similarly, classical drama may provide some sort of dramatic background influence upon the Chester Expositor figures. Perhaps the voice of the narrator in the *Stanzaic Life* was a substantial influence upon how the Chester reviser conceived of his Expositor as he incorporated material from that work into the cycle.²⁰ None of these possibilities, however, can reasonably be demonstrated to be the most immediate and proximate source of the Chester presenters. If they are influences, they are secondary ones. In addition, discussions that point to them as sources for Chester tend to focus their attention upon the Expositors exclusively, leaving unanswered and unconsidered the question of when and where the other presenters came into the cycle.

As mentioned above, Travis argues that the plays in which Expositors appear were revised in the early sixteenth century, with Expositors added at that time, but makes no mention of the other presenters who appear in the cycle. But it turns out that the plays in which Expositors appear are also the ones in which other presenters do as well. Play IV opens with Preco providing fairly typical emcee functions: asking for the audience's attention, telling them what is coming next, and addressing them politely as 'lordinges'.²¹ The Expositor appears three times in the same play, for the first time, after the Abraham, Loth, and Melchysedeck scene. Like Preco, he addresses the audience politely as 'lordinges', but consistent with his different designation ('Expositor' [interpreter] rather than 'Preco' [messenger]), he explains the significance of what they have just seen.²² His appearances after God's calling of Abraham²³ and after the ordered but ultimately prevented sacrifice of Isaac²⁴ likewise show the Expositor speaking in the same polite fashion to the audience as the Messenger, but performing his own designated role of interpreter, explaining in both instances the meaning of the action immediately witnessed, and praying for 'us' to receive obedience like Abraham's. That the two figures are conceived of as having different functions, to be employed when those different purposes were required by the play, is further demonstrated by the fact that Preco returns immediately after the Expositor's last

speech of the play in order to assist the transition between one play and the next: 'Make rowme, lordings, and give us waye, / and lett Balack come in and play'.²⁵ The Expositor (or 'Doctor', as he is referred to in stage directions in the Abraham play) handles spiritual content matters – *why* the audience is being shown a scene, and how they are supposed to understand it – while Preco deals with presentation-related concerns – *how* the play will proceed, what will happen next, etc.

The situation is largely similar in the other plays in which an Expositor appears. In Play V, only one type of special personage is used, a Doctor, who appears twice. Here, the reviser has chosen not to include a messenger-presenter as well, instead giving both functions to the Doctor. In the H version of this play, the Expositor speaks many more times (nine) than did the Doctor, but at least one of their speeches largely overlaps, suggesting that the Doctor is generally conceived of as the same type of figure as the Expositor. The H Expositor's messenger-functions, however, are much fewer than either his interpretative functions or the messenger-function of the Doctor. Thus it is possible for the Doctor to be assigned both interpretative and messenger functions, but the Expositor figure tends to be much more carefully reserved for purely interpretative needs, although in all instances both personages maintain their polite way of addressing the audience. In Play VI, a messenger figure, here called Nuntius, appears briefly to separate scenes, asking the 'lordinges' for room to 'lett Octavian come and playe',²⁶ while the two speeches of the Expositor provide commentary, interpretation, and additional information to allow the audience to better understand what they have seen.²⁷ In Play XII, as in Play V, only a Doctor appears, twice, and is given speeches with expositor-functions,²⁸ while in Play XXII the Expositor is the only special personage we see and performs as expected an interpretative role.²⁹ In general, then, Messengers in the Chester plays function in roles related to presentation, introducing a new scene, focusing the audience's attention, and transitioning between scenes, while Expositors fulfill an interpretative role, explaining the content of the play and the lesson that the audience is supposed to understand from it; both speak directly to the audience, with notable politeness, and both pray for 'us', meaning, presumably, humankind, the larger group to which both actors and audience belong, although the prayers of the Expositors tend to be more extensive.

But Expositors, their close corollaries, Doctors, and the much-ignored Messengers are not the only special personages in the Chester cycle as it was (re)constructed in the early sixteenth century. While absent from the playtexts

themselves, we know from other sources that at this time Banns were added to the cycle. As described by Clopper:

We might reconstruct the writing of the Early Banns as follows. They were originally composed for the Corpus Christi play in or after 1505, the earliest date by which the cappers' play could have entered the cycle, and no later than 1521, by which time the play had been shifted to Whitsuntide. They were revised at least once between 1521 and 1531–32, when the Newhall Proclamation was written, in order to make them conform with the three-day performance schedule, the entry of new plays into the cycle (eg, the tanners' *Lucifer*), and the division of others (eg, the vintners' *Herod* and the mercers' *Magi*). Other revisions may have been made subsequent to this period. The Banns in their present state were copied into the White Book of the Pentice and a parallel record during Henry Gee's second term of office, 1539–40, and remained unchanged until perhaps 1548 when several erasures were made in order to make the Banns conform to the suppression of the Corpus Christi feast.³⁰

These Early Banns provide a text of what was spoken but do not specify who delivered it. In other surviving medieval Banns in *The Castle of Perseverance*, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, and the N-town Banns, the Banns are spoken by presenter-figures called Vexillators. As a working premise, then, let us proceed from the likelihood that the Chester Banns, working on the preexisting model afforded by other medieval Banns, would have been spoken by special figure(s), most probably called Vexillators. Thus the full contingent of Chester presenters includes Expositors, Doctors, Messengers, and Vexillators or some other special personage responsible for delivering the Banns.

As we reframe the earlier question of from whence the Chester Expositor figure might derive into a wider version inquiring into the possible origin of this full set of presenters, it becomes clear that no suitable models can be found in English cycle drama.³¹ No presenters appear in the Towneley plays at all,³² nor in the two surviving pageants of the Coventry cycle. A presenter does feature in the one extant play from the Norwich cycle, but this example, it turns out, does not get us very far. The play survives in two versions, the first from sometime before 1533 and the second from 1565. The presenter, Prolocutor, appears only in the second version. Thus when the Chester cycle was being revised to include presenters, the Norwich cycle, at least from the evidence of the surviving play, would not have provided a model for using presenters in cycle drama. In fact, the Norwich play tends to support the opposite conclusion that the dramaturgy of cycle drama prior to Chester's revision did *not* include the use of presenters. The presenter is absent from

the pre-1533 'A' version of the play, and when added in 1565, is given the name 'Prolocutor' – a Tudor, not medieval, title for a presenter in English drama. No presenters called 'Prolocutor' appear in English medieval drama,³³ but this presenter-name is in use by the mid-sixteenth century; Prolocutors appear in plays such as John Bale's *God's Promises* and *John the Baptist's Preaching* (1538), and *King Darius* (1565), although Prologue (also a presenter-title that does not appear in English medieval drama), is by far the most common name for presenters in sixteenth-century drama.

A single presenter appears in the York cycle, in *The Annunciation and the Visitation*. The Doctour's lengthy speech provides a link between the old and new testament plays, describing how various prophets anticipated the coming of the Lord. Even a quick perusal of his appearance reveals the implausibility that he served as a model for any of the Chester presenters. The York Doctour declares his purpose: man, having fallen from paradise, waits in hell until God sends a saviour and thus he will relate how the prophets foretold the coming of God's help ('Pan is it nedfull for to neven / How prophettis all Goddis counsailes kende').³⁴ This is precisely what he does. The York Doctour does not provide interpretation of a scene shown in the play, as does the Chester Expositor, nor does he provide crowd-handling and general emcee functions as do the Chester Messengers. Rather, the York Doctour provides information necessary to bridge the action that went before with what will follow. Moreover, the York Doctour speaks very differently to the audience. Whereas the Chester presenters politely, and perhaps somewhat obsequiously, refer to the audience as 'lordinges', the York Doctour aligns himself with the audience, speaking of 'oure blisse', 'oure myscheues', and 'oure socoure'.³⁵ The relationship between presenter and audience is thus quite different. The York Doctour's speech posits himself and the audience as together being part of the larger community of Christendom; the Chester presenters speak on behalf of the play to its audience.

The York Doctour, moreover, might not have been available to the Chester reviser as a model for the use of presenters in cycle drama. The York Doctour's *speech* was part of the manuscript from its original compilation in the fifteenth century. However, who delivered this speech at that time is unclear. 'Doctour' as a character designation was added by John Clerke,³⁶ 'servant of the Common Clerk of York. He is first heard of in this post in 1538–9, and he appears to have occupied it until the end of his life.'³⁷ Thus sometime between 1538 and 1580, the year of his death, John Clerke provided this speech with the name of someone to speak it. Prior to that, the speech may or may not have been delivered by a presenter-figure; we have no way of knowing. But

other evidence suggests that it may not have been. Alan J. Fletcher has shown that the speech which begins the N-town *The Parliament of Heaven*, assigned in the manuscript to Contemplacio was originally given by two speakers who were apparently not conceived of as a presenters: 'the original speakers of the 'Contemplacio' prologue to the *Parliament of Heaven* seem to have been two human and universal characters whose function was to plead in the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, on behalf of the mankind whom they represented'.³⁸ Possibly the York speech, assigned in the mid-sixteenth century to a Doctour by John Clerke, was previously delivered by a representative 'of the patriarchs and prophets', as Fletcher concludes about the Contemplacio speech.³⁹ This possibility seems suggestive given the similar nature of both speeches; in both, information about the prophecies that foretold the coming of Christ is given, and the speaker aligns himself with the audience, presenting them all as being members of fallen humanity awaiting their saviour.

The presenters in N-town might seem to be a fairly clear example of the use of presenters in cycle drama that could have provided a model for the Chester reviser. The manuscript was certainly in existence by the time of the early sixteenth-century revision; Stephen Spector, editor of the 1991 EETS edition, says, 'The codex was probably transcribed between c1468 and the early years of the sixteenth century.'⁴⁰ Presenters with functions and speech-patterns like those in the Chester cycle are found in several plays. Contemplacio appears in *Joachim and Anna*, *The Presentation of Mary*, *The Visit to Elizabeth*, and *Passion Play 2*; a Doctor begins the *Assumption of Mary*, and Doctors end *Passion Play 1*. But although chronologically the N-town manuscript would have been in existence and hence available, theoretically, to the Chester reviser as a model in the early sixteenth century, we need to ask what sort of model it would have provided. It is now widely accepted that large portions of N-town are interpolated plays that previously had their own independent existence.⁴¹ The plays that include Contemplacio are among those interpolated into the collection, as are *The Assumption of Mary* and the *Passion Plays*, in which Doctors appear. The N-town presenters speak and perform functions like what they originally were, presenters in non-cycle plays.

To see this, of course, we need to look briefly at presenters in non-cycle plays. Presenters appear in the fragmentary *The Pride of Life*, the Brome *Abraham and Isaac*, the Digby's *The Conversion of St. Paul* and *The Killing of Children*, and *Everyman*.⁴² *The Pride of Life* begins with a presenter who asks the audience for quiet, referring to them as '[l]ordinge[s] and ladiis', introduces the plot of the coming play, and prays for the success of the play.⁴³

Similarly, Poeta appears twice in the Digby *Killing of the Children*, beginning and ending the play. In his opening speech, he explains the occasion for the performance, asks the audience to excuse the company if the quality of the production is lacking, reminds them of what they saw last year and tells what the current performance is about, and asks them to listen quietly, politely referring to them as ‘frendes’.⁴⁴ In his concluding speech Poeta again addresses the audience politely, this time as ‘Honorable souereignes’, asks the audience for ‘youre paciens,/ To pardon us of oure offens’, thanks them for ‘your good attendaunce’, announces what the show will be the following year, calls the ‘menstralles’ to ‘geve us a daunce’.⁴⁵ Poeta, in Digby’s *The Conversion of St. Paul* has the most sustained presence of a non-cycle presenter, giving six speeches throughout the play, including the speeches which begin and end it. In his first speech, he prays for the audience and asks them for ‘license’ to proceed with the play; the middle speeches conclude and begin the action at each station, asking the audience to follow to the next station and, once there, again asking them for ‘license’ to continue with the next; the last concludes the show, asks the audience to excuse ‘owur symplynes ... That of retoryk have non intellygens’, and prays for them.⁴⁶ *The Pride of Life* presenter, Digby’s *The Killing of the Children* Poeta, and Digby’s *The Conversion of St. Paul* Poeta perform emcee functions almost exclusively, providing the rhetorical logistics of handling the crowd and getting the show going/stopping smoothly.

Other non-cycle presenters exhibit additional functions. The Brome *Abraham and Isaac* ends with a Doctor who explains the lesson of the play (‘For thys story schoyt yowe [here]/ How we schuld kepe to owr po[we]re./ Goddys commaumentys wythowt grochyng’), providing a contemporary application for it (‘And thys women that wepe so sorowfully/ Whan that hyr chyldryn dey them froo,/ As nater woll, and kynd;/ Yt is but folly’).⁴⁷ *Everyman* has two different presenters. A Messenger opens the play in typical emcee form, asking the audience to pay attention to the upcoming play, and explains what it will be about. The play ends with a Doctor who explains what moral the audience should have understood from the play (‘forsake Pride, for he deceyueth you in the end’).⁴⁸ Thus the non-cycle presenters often exhibit pragmatic, master-of-ceremonies type work but some show interpretative functions as well.

The presenters in N-town speak in ways and for purposes strikingly similar to those of the non-cycle plays, which should be unsurprising given that before their interpolation into N-town, the plays in which these presenters appear were non-cycle plays. At the beginning of *Joachim and Anna*, for instance, Contemplacio’s emcee functions are clear. He prays for the audience, tells

them what the play will be about, and asks for quiet and attentive listening. The situation is similar with *Contemplacio's* speech which begins *The Presentation of Mary in the Temple* and in his speech which ends this play, as well as his speech which begins *Passion Play 2*. *Contemplacio's* appearance in *The Visit to Elizabeth* contains somewhat a different purpose, albeit one which we have seen before. Here, *Contemplacio* provides additional information to the audience that is useful in understanding the play; in this case, the founding of the temple and the establishment of the priesthood to worship within it, and *Zacharias's* position as such a priest. This is, of course, very similar to functions handled in speeches of the Chester Expositor. *Contemplacio's* conclusion to the play also contains interpretative qualities; he explains that the action just performed illustrates the origin of the Ave Maria, for instance, although the speech contains emcee qualities as well in its final stanza. *Contemplacio* as presenter, then, functions in ways consistent with those seen in non-cycle drama, to whose ranks he indeed used to belong before his plays were incorporated into the N-town compilation.⁴⁹

Similarly, the Doctor who begins *The Assumption of Mary* contains both interpretative and emcee functions. The audience is referred to as 'souereynes', asked to be quiet and pay attention, and told what the play will be about.⁵⁰ But the Doctor also provides additional information to the audience about the subject matter of the play, a brief *précis* of Mary's life hitherto. Doctors also appear at the end of *Passion Play 1*, and their appearance here is a bit more problematic. Atypically for presenters, their speech is not obviously directed to the audience. Indeed, in their first stanzas, their attention is rhetorically directed to God as they pray for the audience, and as the episode continues, their speech is rhetorically construed as addressing the various apostles that they are apparently welcoming, hence the editorial subtitle of this section, *The Procession of Saints*. But it is also clear that despite their differences in rhetorical construction, the conception of their purpose is similar to that of interpretative presenters; 'To þe pepyl not lernyd I stonde as a techer', *Primus Doctor* declares.⁵¹

The presenters incorporated into the Chester cycle during its early sixteenth century period of revision cannot, therefore, derive from models elsewhere in the dramaturgy of cycle drama. Rather, Chester's presenters derive from those in non-cycle drama, as do those of N-town. Indeed, it is already generally accepted that direct influence between a non-cycle play and the Chester plays exists. It has been long known that the Brome play and the corresponding Chester play are very similar, but in recent years scholarly consensus has become that the direction of influence was from Brome to

Chester.⁵² The Brome play is, of course, a non-cycle play that uses a presenter-figure, and the known relationship between this play and the Chester cycle buttresses my assertion that Chester's presenters derive most directly from contemporary non-cycle dramaturgy.

Moreover, the N-town plays, compiled into the form of a cycle⁵³ in the late fifteenth century, provide a provocative possibility as a model for the Chester reviser. The N-town compiler pulls together stand-alone non-cycle plays and stitches them into cycle-form, among them plays in which presenters feature prominently and performing the emcee and interpretative functions they had as non-cycle presenters. In addition, the N-town compiler provides his collection with Banns. Chester's presenters may derive from cycle dramaturgy after all – of a sort. The N-town compilation provides a model for the incorporation and use of the non-cycle techniques of Banns and presenters in the cycle-play genre, which the Chester reviser can then follow.

But the addition of Banns and presenters are only a part of the adaptations made to the Chester cycle in the early sixteenth century. As Clopper argues, during the early sixteenth century the Chester play expanded from being 'more a Passion play' to a cycle with both old and new testament plays telling the biblical history of mankind.⁵⁴ The switch from a one-day performance at Corpus Christi to a three day production at Whitsuntide also occurs during this time.⁵⁵ Clopper notes as well that the route of the procession changed, most probably the result of a decision to 'perform the cycle in more than one location'; ie, then, production methods changed from stationary to mobile (wagon-based).⁵⁶ The early sixteenth-century revisions of Chester thus constitute a massive retooling of the play. Tanner claims that 'the expansion necessitated moving the performance to Whitsun week and spreading it out over three days' time,⁵⁷ but the word 'necessitated' here is troubling. To speak of these changes as being 'necessitated' implies a lack of agency behind them, that they are something that happened as a result of forces outside the control of the play's supervisors, and perhaps against their wishes. Such an implicit view undercuts recognition of the innovative nature of the changes and choices being made in the rewriting of Chester. Clopper suggests that a possible motivation for these substantial modifications may have been economic, to allow Chester to draw in more visitors with a play that did not conflict with that at Coventry and rivaled other cities' offerings in terms of spectacle.⁵⁸ This may be well the case; at any rate, it is usually helpful to keep in mind the economic components and considerations involved with the production of medieval drama, particularly large-scale and expensive performances like the cycle plays. But here, in conclusion, I would like to

consider how the adoption into the Chester cycle of the presenter technique from the non-cycle plays dovetails with the state of the cycle genre itself during this time period.

Living drama is always under revision, but the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century seems to have been a time of particular activity in the revising of cycle drama. During this time we have the compilation of the N-town manuscript – stand-alone non-cycle plays collected together in the form of a cycle. Since the purpose for this compilation is uncertain, the exact nature of the innovation here is likewise uncertain, but it seems clear that change is taking place in the understanding of what cycle drama is. It can be imitated, and a version constructed from otherwise disparate texts rather than being the product of a city or region. Likewise the sole surviving play of the Norwich cycle provides evidence of other innovations; a presenter is added, one whose speeches make clear that the play can be performed as part of a cycle, or on its own; the stage direction before the first prologue specifies ‘Yt ys to be notyd that when the Grocers Pageant is played withowte eny other goenge befor yt then doth the Prolocutor say in this wise’,⁵⁹ while for the second ‘Note that yf ther goeth eny other pageants before yt, the Prolocutor sayeth as ys on the other side and leaveth owte this’.⁶⁰ The notion of performing cycle plays as stand-alone plays does not of course seem revolutionary to us, but we have no evidence that this was done in the middle ages; indeed it was unusual enough in the sixteenth century to require this sort of careful handling by the Norwich reviser, suggesting another way in which the techniques and conception of cycle-drama were being modified in response to changing pressures. The compilation of the Towneley manuscript, while not yet well understood, may also suggest changes in the conception of cycle-drama in the sixteenth century, although perhaps more the fear of those changes and a desire to preserve the older form rather than ‘innovation’,⁶¹ if by that we mean change intended to make the cycle drama more workable in the changing social and dramaturgical context of the sixteenth century. John Clerke’s designation of a Doctour to deliver the speech that begins the York *The Annunciation and the Visitation* may also suggest innovation; is Clerke recording a preexisting practice, or a recent change in who delivered this speech? We have no way of knowing. Intriguingly, Clerke also provides a tantalizingly comment about this speech that ‘this matter is / newly mayde wherof / we haue no copy’.⁶² We have to wonder, although we cannot know the answer, what this new version of the speech was like, and why it had been ‘newly made’; it is tempting that think that in light of the innovations in other cycle drama, the Spicers decided to bring their play up-to-date. These cycles’

modifications, as well as the substantial Chester revisions, with the incorporation of presenters among them, seems a noteworthy indicator of profound upheaval and innovation in the dramaturgy of cycles in the early sixteenth century.

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the dramaturgy of cycle drama was responding to changing circumstances; innovative alterations were being incorporated into cycles, and the cycle genre itself was being consciously recognized and imitated – and innovated. As Roma Gill comments, ‘Nowadays it is generally recognized that plays, more than any other literary artifacts, are ‘unstable’ – that is to say, their texts are subject to constant revision and re-revision throughout their theatrical lives.’⁶³ Given their long production history, cycle plays are even more subject to this problem, and it is one that any scholar dealing with these plays has to grapple with. We are not yet able, if we ever will be, to completely discern the course of revision for any particular cycle; Clopper’s arguments about the progression of revisions in the Chester cycle are plausible, as are Travis’s about the introduction of Expositors, but neither case can be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Nor can my suggestion that the presenters in the Chester cycle were adopted from non-cycle plays. But the argument seems bolstered by contextualization in the profound and pervasive revisions that cycle drama was undergoing. In the early sixteenth century, questions were continually put forward about what constituted a cycle, and the answers changed over time; in the past twenty years, we have found ourselves similarly interrogating what we know about cycles, and likewise changing answers.

Notes

- 1 E.K. Chambers, *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1945), 26.
- 2 F.M. Salter. *Mediaeval Drama in Chester* (Toronto, 1955), 45.
- 3 Lawrence M. Clopper, ‘The History and Development of the Chester Cycle’, *Modern Philology*, 75:3 (1978), 231.
- 4 Clopper, 219.
- 5 Clopper, 220.
- 6 It should be noted, though, that the significance, if any, of such seeming singular-plural shifts is still a topic of scholarly discussion; David Mills, in his *Recycling the Cycle: The City of Chester and its Whitsun Plays* (Toronto, 1998),

says that he has concluded that ‘the usage seems to depend on whether the concept is of the total cyclic structure or the individual plays that constitute it’ (116), rather than providing a reliable indicator of whether the drama under discussion is a singular passion play or a cycle composed of multiple smaller plays; we would therefore do well to remember that this evidence should be not relied upon exclusively to indicate the expansion from a singular play to multiple plays.

- 7 Clopper, ‘History and Development’, 221.
- 8 Peter W. Travis, *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle* (Chicago, 1982), 58.
- 9 Jorg O. Fichte, *Expository Voices in Medieval Drama* (Nurnberg, 1975), 102.
- 10 Indeed, I suspect that this is probably closer to what Fichte actually means by ‘invent’ – the creation of a figure hitherto not present in the Chester plays, but modeled upon a concept already in existence in other drama, rather than the wholesale creation of both figure and the concept of the figure.
- 11 Chambers, *English Literature* 26.
- 12 Fichte, *Expository Voices* 98.
- 13 Margaret Tanner, *The Genealogy of the Chester Expositor*, PhD thesis (Tulane University, 1998).
- 14 Tanner, 29.
- 15 Marie Axton (ed), *Three Tudor Classical Interludes* (Cambridge, 1982), 2.
- 16 Axton, 2.
- 17 Meg Twycross, *Terence in English: An Early Sixteenth-Century Translation of The Andria*, Medieval English Theatre Modern-Spelling Texts 6 (University of Lancaster, 1987), 6.
- 18 See Alfred Harbage (ed), *The Annals of English Drama 975–1700*, revised by S. Schoenbaum, second edition (Philadelphia, 1964).
- 19 Indeed, the early sixteenth-century translation of *The Andria* may well suggest influence going the other way; that is, contemporary English dramaturgy influencing how classical drama is envisioned and translated in the late middle ages and early Renaissance. This English *Andria* has a presenter-figure, the Poet, who introduces the play; one might argue that this would mean that the early sixteenth-century reviser of the Chester play(s) would, theoretically, have had at least one example of a classical presenter available to him as model. But the Poet’s speech is, as Meg Twycross notes in the introduction to her edition, ‘much more expansive’ than its Latin original. Terence’s prologue is 27 lines long, concerned largely with answering charges against the quality of his work leveled by other playwrights and only briefly introducing the subject of the play, while the English version is nearly four times as long, providing a detailed

accounting of the plot to come and addressing the audience considerably more intimately than its Latin counterpart. One can hardly help but wonder whether the translator has adapted the prologue into one more like those familiar to him in contemporary non-cycle native English drama.

- 20 See David Mills, *Recycling the Cycle* pages 155–6 for a synopsis of the critical history of the relationship between *The Stanzaic Life* and the Chester plays.
- 21 R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle* (New York, 1974), 1–16. All citations to the Chester cycle refer to this edition, hereinafter called *CMC*.
- 22 *CMC*, IV, 113–44.
- 23 *CMC*, IV, 193–208.
- 24 *CMC*, IV, 460–75.
- 25 *CMC*, IV, 484–5.
- 26 *CMC*, VI, 177.
- 27 *CMC*, VI, 564–643 and 699–722.
- 28 *CMC*, XII, 169–216 and 281–312.
- 29 *CMC*, XXII, 25–48, 73–124, 157–72, and 213–340.
- 30 Clopper, ‘History and Development’ 230–1.
- 31 Records exist of other Banns being performed, and paid for, but almost certainly for non-cycle drama for which neither the playtexts nor the Banns are extant. See Bruce Moore, ‘The Banns in Medieval English Drama’, *Leeds Studies in English* 24 (1993), 91–122.
- 32 Nor it is still widely accepted that Towneley should be understood as a coherent cycle; see Barbara Palmer, ‘Recycling “The Wakefield Cycle”’, *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 41 (2002), 88–130.
- 33 I am aware that the presenter who begins the fragmentary *The Pride of Life* is often referred to as Prolocutor. This name, however, is editorial, not textual; see, for instance, the edition in Norman Davis’ *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments* (New York, 1970). The absence of this presenter name from other extant medieval drama gives us good reason to suspect that the editorial assignation of it to the presenter in *The Pride of Life* is unwarranted.
- 34 All citations from the York cycle are from Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (London, 1982), 13–14.
- 35 Beadle, 31, 39, and 74.
- 36 See Richard Beadle’s footnote describing this feature of the manuscript, 110.
- 37 Beadle, 16.
- 38 Alan J. Fletcher, ‘The “Contemplacio” Prologue to the N-Town “Play of the Parliament of Heaven”’, *Notes and Queries* 27 (1980), 112.

- 39 Fletcher, 111.
- 40 Stephen Spector (ed), *The N-town Play* (New York, 1991), xvi.
- 41 See Appendix I of Volume 2 of Stephen Spector's *The N-Town Play*; Douglas Sugano's 1994 article "'This game wel pleyd in good a-ray": The N-Town Playbooks and East Anglian Games', *Comparative Drama* 28:2 (1994), 221–34; Peter Meredith's *The Mary Play from the N-town Manuscript* (Exeter, 1997) and his *The Passion Play from the N. Town Manuscript* (New York, 1990).
- 42 In addition, the Durham prologue, the Cambridge prologue, and the Reynes Extracts Epilogue are generally assumed to have been spoken by presenters, and indeed the speeches sound like those delivered by other non-cycle presenters. In The Durham prologue, the audience, referred to as 'lordinges', is asked to quiet down and attend politely to the play, the plot is previewed, and the audience is prayed for. In the Reynes Extracts Epilogue, the audience are also politely referred to as 'sovereyns', are asked to excuse the quality of the play, and are invited to a fundraising ale. However, the same caution holds here as with the York Doctour; we cannot necessarily assume that a presenter-figure delivered the speech in the absence of a speaker-designation. In other non-cycle plays, characters are used to fulfill these sorts of purposes. A question reasonably arises: are presenters who speak like presenters, and characters who speak like presenters substantively different, particularly in performance? Careful scholars have taken both approaches to this problem. I tend towards a stance that recognizes the overlap in content and perhaps presentation between presenters and some characters, but would hold that presenters, having been given non-character titles in the playtexts, are conceived of as different from characters and that original conceptual distinction should be recognized.
- 43 Norman Davis (ed), *Non-cycle Plays and Fragments* (New York, 1970), 5.
- 44 John C. Coldewey (ed), *Early English Drama: An Anthology* (New York, 1993), 49.
- 45 Coldewey, 551, 554, 560, and 565–6.
- 46 Coldewey, 659–60.
- 47 Coldewey, 440–52.
- 48 Coldewey, 904.
- 49 The one speech assigned to Contemplacio that does not closely resemble the model for non-cycle presenters is the one that begins *The Parliament of Heaven*, which, as mentioned earlier, Alan J. Fletcher has shown was originally assigned to non-presenter speakers. Peter Meredith likewise says that, 'Contemplacio's speech at the beginning of the Parliament episode was once clearly spoken by two speakers and ... its attribution to Contemplacio occurred when the Parlia-

ment episode was linked with the Annunciation in the *Mary Play* (*Mary Play* 3).

- 50 Spector, *The N-Town Play, The Assumption of Mary*, 387, l 1.
- 51 Spector, *The N-Town Play, Passion Play 1: The Procession of Saints*, 294, l 1257.
- 52 See, for instance, R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents* (Chapel Hill, 1983), 91.
- 53 The question of whether N-town was intended to be performed as a cycle is still a topic of much debate, particularly given the apparent requirement of different production types for different portions of the manuscript.
- 54 Clopper, 'History and Development', 220.
- 55 Clopper, 221.
- 56 Clopper, 221–2.
- 57 Tanner, *Genealogy*, 6.
- 58 Clopper, 'History and Development', 245–6.
- 59 Coldewey, *Early English Drama*, 157, sd before 1.
- 60 Coldewey, 158, sd following 29.
- 61 Since, as Barbara Palmer has argued in 'Recycling "The Wakefield Cycle"', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 41 (2002), 104, it seems to be the case that the Towneleys were recusant Catholics, the compilation may have been a project undertaken at their direction.
- 62 Beadle, *The York Plays*, 110, footnote linked to line 1 in play 12, *The Annunciation and the Visitation*.
- 63 Gill (ed), Preface, *Dr. Faustus*, New Mermaids (New York, 1989), vi.