

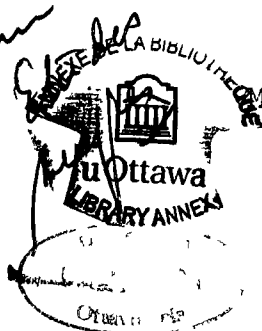
THE CHESTER CYCLE OF MYSTERY PLAYS CONSIDERED AS AN EPIC

BY

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Master of Arts.

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CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF EPIC

The idea of considering a whole cycle of medieval mystery plays as an epic requires the presentation of a few basic ideas on the essential nature of the epic; this first chapter attempts to fulfill that task. Given the ordinary educated person's outlook on literature, the suggestion of regarding as epic what has always been called drama, and only drama, is a disturbing and unwarranted confusion of genres. This is all the more reason why an explanation of this approach and of precisely what is implied by the term "epic" is necessary at this stage.

Tragedy is drama, yet if we look at Aristotle on tragedy and epic we find the two are not so widely different as it might appear. Having defined tragedy as "an artistic imitation of an action that is serious, complete in itself, and of an adequate magnitude,"¹ Aristotle declares that epic is basically similar to tragedy:

In the Epic Poem, as in Tragedy, the story should be constructed on dramatic principles: everything should turn about a single action, one that is a whole, and is organically perfect -- having a beginning, and a middle, and an end.²

The method of handling alone would seem to be different:

The Constituent Parts, also, of the Epic Poem must be the same as in Tragedy -- save that the epic

1. Lane Cooper, Aristotle on the Art of Poetry. New York: Cornell University Press, 1947, p. 17.

2. Ibid., p. 75.

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poet does not use the elements of Melody and Spectacle; for there necessarily are Reversals and Discoveries and Sufferings in this form of poetry as in that.¹

Tragedy is presented in action on the stage; epic is more leisurely, to be read or heard not necessarily all at once. The two deal with the same matter in a serious and dignified fashion, with this difference that epic is more diffuse -- a fact which led Aristotle to think it had less merit.²

One may be permitted to think that literature and criticism have both developed since Aristotle's time; there are critics, such as Tillyard, who would not agree with Aristotle's judgment as to the relative values of tragedy and epic. The relative values we are not primarily concerned with at present; but the nature and drift of the epic does concern us. In the terms of Aristotle, a sufficiently diffuse tragedy might be indistinguishable from epic if it were, for instance, read and not acted.³ One of the most notable qualities of the medieval cycle is its slow diffusive build-up, occupying sometimes three days and at the shortest four to five hours. It is quite clear, therefore, that we may not be undertaking any wildly speculative enquiry when we attempt to measure the Chester Cycle as an epic.

1. Cooper, op. cit., p. 77.

2. See Ibid., p. 93.

3. See Ibid., p. 93.

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Continuing our own examination of the notion of an epic in post-Aristotlian writers, we might take an inductive rather than an analytical or dogmatic approach to the discovery of a definition. This is the method used by Tillyard, who feels that you most reasonably find the nature of epic by discovering the qualities common to such well established and long standing works as the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Divine Comedy, the Lusiad, and Paradise Lost. The method of approach and basic outline of ideas on the nature of epic here are patterned on Tillyard's English Epic and its Background. In fact, it was an apparently casual remark of Tillyard's which gave birth to the idea of examining a complete cycle of mystery plays as an epic.¹ The explanation Tillyard gives of his method of approach to the epic will, therefore, serve as our approach to the question:

Whether or not the reader likes the ensuing account of the epic, he will have to admit that it squares with a modern practice of going outside the bare form or the bare fact and seeking the essential spirit. A.W. Schlegel used the words classical and romantic in a very simple sense. Classical meant ancient Greek and Roman; romantic the

1. "...Piers Plowman emerges as the undoubted, if imperfect, English epic of the Middle Ages. The only literary phenomenon that could at all match it would be a complete cycle of Mystery Plays...." E.M.W. Tillyard, The English Epic and its Background. London: Chatto and Windus, 1954, p. 171. The idea has also been expressed by J.M. Manly in an article on the miracle plays: "The pageants were parts of a vast whole dramatic in its theme, but not in all its parts.... Fundamentally the Scripture cycles are not dramatic and spectacular, but epic and oratorical." "The Miracle Play in Medieval England," Essays by Divers Hands, vol. VII (ed. Margaret Woods). 1927, pp. 140-141.

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Gothic that came after. About a hundred years later Middleton Murry declared that 'Romanticism and Classicism are perennial modes of the human spirit.' The tragic has now for a long time been found in Beowulf, Lycidas, the Ancient Mariner, and Madame Bovary; the comic exists in many places outside the comic drama. By such analogy there is warrant enough for refusing to identify epic with the heroic poem and for seeking its differentia in matters other than nominal and formal.¹

Our method, therefore, will transcend mere literary forms and seek the essential qualities of epic regardless of where they are found.

Tillyard discovers that it would be dangerous either consciously or unconsciously to equate the epic with the heroic. It is very difficult not to fall into the habit of equating them, partly because we tend to derive our ideas of epic from the poems of Homer, which happen to be heroic as well as epic, and not from the Divine Comedy, which is epic without being heroic; and partly because there lingers in our mind the idea that only the primitive is truly epic, and in primitive times it is mainly the heroic strain that has sufficient seriousness to have an initial chance of qualifying as epic. The heroic episode is not an epic, any more than a fable of La Fontaine is a comedy. One must either equate epic with heroic and relegate the epic to those pieces of narrative literature that succeed in dealing with the heroic age, or sever the connection and base epic on requirements not exclusively heroic.² Ours will be the latter approach.

1. English Epic, pp. 4-5.

2. See Ibid., p. 140.

In this view, the epic transcends the heroic form and is characterized by four essential requirements: 1, control commensurate with what is included; 2, a "choric" quality; 3, the quality of amplitude, breadth or inclusiveness; and 4, a high seriousness, "the use of words in a very distinguished way."¹

These essential qualities imply the basic fact that in every epic worthy of its name there is a grand theme, argument or general idea pervading the whole and capable of exciting admiration.² Aristotle, we recall, having spoken of tragedy as an artistic imitation of an action that is serious, complete in itself, and of an adequate magnitude, says that epic also turns about a single great action, having a beginning, and a middle, and an end.³ The whole plot must carry the impression of dignity or solemnity proper to the theme. Dryden refers to an epic poem as "undoubtedly the greatest work which the soul of man is capable to perform." He declares that its action "is always one, entire, and great."⁴

Very often the greatness of an epic's theme is either implicitly or explicitly declared in its opening lines; the initial

1. Tillyard, op. cit., 5-13.

2. See F.M. Connell, A Study of Poetry. New York: Allyn and Bacon, 1947, p. 94.

3. See Cooper, p. 75.

4. John Dryden, "Of the Aeneid" in Virgil (translators, J. Dryden and P. Wrangham). New York: Harper and Brothers, 1878, p. 175.

passage of Virgil's Aeneid is a case in point:

Arms and the man I sing, who forced by Fate,
And haughty Juno's unrelenting hate,
Expelled and exiled, left the Trojan shore.
Long labours, both by sea and land, he bore,
And in the doubtful war, before he won
The Latian realm, and built the destined town;
His banished gods restored to rites divine,
And settled sure succession in his line,
From whence the race of Alban fathers come,
And the long glories of majestic Rome.¹

Here is promised something sublime and majestic. Even in translation, it is possible to experience the effects of the sweeping rhetoric which introduces the great argument. Again, hear the first few words of Beowulf:

Lo! we have heard the glory of the kings of
the Spear-Danes in days gone by, how the
chieftains wrought mighty deeds.²

The "glory of kings" and of "mighty deeds" "in days gone by" is the great theme of which Old English poets are so fond. In modern English the best example of an epic in which the grand theme is deliberately and explicitly stated in its opening lines is Milton's Paradise Lost. The very first line gives the reader to understand that great things are about to happen, things greater even than those in the famous Homeric epics:

1. Aeneid, Book I, in the edition referred to in footnote 4, on page 5, p. 233.

2. Beowulf in Anglo-Saxon Poetry (ed. R.K. Gordon). New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1957, p. 3.

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Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit
 Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
 Brought Death into the World, and all our woe
 With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
 Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
 Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
 Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
 That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
 In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
 Rose out of Chaos: or if Sion Hill
 Delight thee more, and Siloa's Brook that flow'd
 Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
 Invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song,
 That with no middle flight intends to soar
 Above th' Aonian Mount, while it pursues
 Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime.¹

In the final lines of this passage Milton declares what is his high central theme and requests divine aid:

What in me is dark
 Illumin, what is low raise and support;
 That to the highth of this great Argument
 I may assert Eternal Providence,
 And justifie the ways of God to men.²

In his invocation to the "heavenly muse," the Holy Ghost, Milton shows that he is well aware of the magnitude of his task: the theme of an epic must be a grand one, requiring all the will-power and effort that the human soul is capable of.

The theme of epic, like that of tragedy, deals with suffering. Paradise Lost portrays the suffering resulting from a finite being's deliberately setting his will against that of his Infinite Creator.

1. Paradise Lost in The Student's Milton (ed. F.A. Patterson). New York: F.S. Crofts & Co., 1939, p. 160.

2. Ibid., p. 160.

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In both the Aeneid and Beowulf a great man is subjected to tremendous hardships and suffering and bears himself with patience and courage. In a tragedy or an epic it may be that the hero can conquer only by sacrificing his own life. Beowulf dies to save his people and so does Samson in Milton's dramatic poem, Samson Agonistes. The ability to face excruciating torments and death is the final testimony of a man's devotion and love: "A greater love has no man than he lay down his life for his friends."

The action of epic is like that of tragedy in that it is dramatic. Characters act upon each other and are influenced by their environment; there is conflict and contrast, harmony and disharmony. These qualities are present because in epic the characters are truly drawn and have motivation. A romance, which has no genuine characterization, cannot have such motivation; incident merely follows incident without having any truly necessary sequence. W.P. Ker emphasizes the necessity of a dramatic quality in epic:

Without dramatic representation of the characters, epic is mere history or romance; the variety and life of epic are to be found in the drama that springs up at every encounter of the personages....The success of epic poetry depends on the author's power of imagining and representing characters.¹

For concrete examples we might move from Beowulf and his followers boasting in the mead-hall, to Langland's lively interplay of alleg-

1. W.P. Ker, Epic and Romance. New York: Dover Publications, 1957, p. 17.

orical figures, and on to Milton's Satan,

"Vaunting aloud, but rackt with deep despare."¹

If the epic is dramatic it is, as Aristotle says, "built upon dramatic principles."² In an epic, then, the solemn action is initiated, it builds up to a central climax, and it descends to a logical and inevitable conclusion.

So much for the theme, argument, or central action of epic. We now return to a discussion of the four qualities of epic mentioned earlier. The first of these, control, is intimately related to unity of action. An epic is much longer than a stage play, and therefore it is harder for the epic poet to sustain one serious and well-ordered action throughout. No artist, no matter how great his genius, could possibly maintain his inspiration, without interruption, for any such great length of time. In order to write an epic, then, a poet must be capable of continued exercise of the will to carry him over mental lapses. The grand theme and overall plan must be in his mind, and he must bend all his energies to the creation of the particular order he had conceived in the first place. Even when his inspiration fails he must exercise his will in order to carry the work along without lapse. Aristotle mentioned that the epic may contain material for

1. Paradise Lost, Book I, p. 162.

2. Cooper, p. 75.

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several tragedies. This is true in its context, but Aristotle would agree that the epic is much more than a mere collection of episodes, lyrics, or what have you.¹ There must be a pervading unity of theme and structure proper not to a hodge-podge of incidents and moods, but rather to a work of majestic elevation and grandeur -- a work similar to a great cathedral, in which every brick and shingle has its own beauty contributing to the general effect.

The analogy of the cathedral is a happy one because it conveys well the impression that epic is momentous in import, worthy to excite great admiration, and requiring, in the first place, almost super-human efforts of will to construct:

So hard a thing it is to build the perfect structure of heroic dimensions, which, like the mediaeval cathedral, encloses a hundred vistas of delight within its pillared aisles and chapels, and dominates without, in tower and spire and buttressed battlements, the whole countryside, a monument for age-long wonder and satisfied contemplation.²

The epic poet must possess the powerful will or self-control to carry through a work in spite of the vicissitudes of time. His is the well-ordered mind which secures as broad a prospect of reality as possible, then proceeds to stake all on the one great artistic venture. And a great venture it is indeed, a venture in which very few men succeed. There are poets, and some of them very good poets, who

1. See Cooper, p. 75.

2. W.M. Dixon, English Epic and Heroic Poetry. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1912, p. 15.

could not have succeeded in creating an epic. Their forte is the lyric, short story, and such shorter forms of literary art, which may be written in a comparatively short time, when the inspiration prompts. So few in fact are the writers who are capable of the breadth of outlook and sustained exercise of the will required for epic writing, that all the recognized epics that have been written do not number more than a couple of dozen.

While it is true that epic is not necessarily written in heroic form, it is equally true that it must create a "heroic impression."¹ This impression is not achieved only by a narrative of heroic deeds performed on a battlefield, the clang of swords, the triumphant shout of the victors, and the despairing moans of the vanquished. All this is fit matter for epic, but epic can exist in its essential parts without any physical clash of arms. By the "heroic impression" proper to epic is meant a certain dignity or elevation pervading the whole:

Of themselves great actions and great characters impart that dignity, the uplifting strain, without which the poem lays no claim to epic honours, a certain elevation of tone, proper to the theme and the conduct of the theme. Nor is it sufficient that this dignity or elevation be occasionally felt, it must pervade the whole, it must be sustained throughout.²

There must be a single impression of awe and admiration aroused by the

1. Tillyard, p. 10.

2. Dixon, op. cit., p. 21.

solemn and stately unfolding of the unified and well-proportioned plot or argument.

Leaving "control," we come to a second requirement of epic, that is the "choric." By the "choric" quality of epic we mean that its author must express the feelings of a large group of people living in or near his own time: behind the author is a large multitude of men of whose most serious convictions and dear habits he is the mouthpiece. The epic must reflect something of the zeitgeist, or spirit of its age. Tillyard quotes Abercrombie's description of the epic poet as

accepting, and with his genius transfiguring
the general circumstance of his time...symbol-
izing in some appropriate form, whatever sense
of the significance of life he feels acting as
the accepted unconscious metaphysic of the time.¹

The epic poet sets forth the lofty glory and the grand theme which is common to the people or society in which he lives. Thus, for example, Beowulf exhibits the Anglo-Saxon people's respect for the kingly virtues of courage and self sacrifice, and the vassel's virtue of loyalty to a lord, in a pagan setting, tempered by the Christian viewpoint.

The epic is a literary reflection^{on} a broad scale of a people's outlook on reality. It cannot be artificial; it must be firmly rooted in the underlying current of contemporary ideas -- The "unconscious metaphysic of the time":

Epic... must have faith in the system of beliefs
or way of life it bears witness to. The reason

1. English Epic, p. 12.

for this belongs to other qualities of the epic than the choric. Only when people have faith in their own age can they include the maximum of life in their vision and exert their will-power to its utmost capacity.¹

The ideals represented in an epic must be noble, powerful, and living in the contemporary mentality. Neither Beowulf nor the Divine Comedy could be written in, for example, our own country today. This is so because the system of beliefs and ideals represented by these works are not so respected, nor are they nearly so vital to the majority of Canadian people in the twentieth century as they were to the eighth century Anglo-Saxons or fourteenth century Italians.

One way of finding the beliefs and ideals of a society is to study the character of its epic hero, for the epic hero is far more likely than any other character in literature to embody all the particular virtues admired and striven for by the populace. Thus the Greek epic heroes represent the ideals of individuality and self-aggrandisement of the ancient Greeks, the Roman epic heroes the devotion to duty of the Romans, and so on.²

The epic deals with the concerns its age takes most seriously, and it will be found in the literary forms that embody those concerns.³ The epic poet draws on tradition in order to reflect the

1. Tillyard, p. 13.

2. See M.B. McNamee, Honor and the Epic Hero. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960, p. 190.

3. See Tillyard, p. 135.

outlook of his time, to be the spokesman for his people:

It must also be borne in mind that the poet did not confine himself to his own inventions. All true epics are the work of any brains, containing sometimes the experience and often the legends of many centuries. The hand which gives the composition final shape and fills it with the spirit of a single age, is the last of a long series.¹

This is in no way to degrade the achievement of the epic poet. Even the most creative artist makes use of whatever material he needs from tradition and from other writers in the molding of his own work. Now part of the task of the epic poet is to embody in his work the outlook of his age; to do this he must draw upon the proper media, be it history, legend, or homily. The epic is a literary receptacle of the thoughts and feelings of its time; it is immediately en rapport with its audience. As Ker says:

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The more original and native kind of epic has immediate association with all that the people know about themselves, with all their customs, all that part of their experience which no one can account for or refer to any particular source. A poem like Beowulf can play directly on a thousand chords of association; the range of its appeal to the minds of an audience is almost unlimited; on no side is the poet debarred from freedom of movement, if only he remember first of all what is due to the hero. He has all the life of his people to strengthen him.²

The inclusion of a multitude of situations and characters reflecting

1. M.V. Routh, God, Man, & Epic Poetry. Toronto: Macmillan & Co., 1927, vol. II, p. 255.

2. Epic and Romance, p. 28.

contemporary life, and even everyday life, enables the epic to present a view of much more of reality. This leads us to a third quality of epic, that of amplitude.

An epic must have that quality which may be characterized in various degrees by the words amplitude, breadth, inclusiveness, and variety. This ability to deal with more sides of life differentiates it, as Aristotle says, from tragedy, which aims at presenting a strictly limited view of life with greater intensity. The epic tries to present a less intense but much broader view of life. This quality of "inclusiveness" appeals to Ker:

Epic poetry is one of the complex and comprehensive kinds of literature, in which most of the other kinds may be included -- romance, history, comedy; tragical, comical, historical, pastoral are terms not sufficiently various to denote the variety of the Iliad and the Odyssey.... In an epic poem where the characters are vividly imagined, it follows naturally that their various moods and problems involve a variety of scenery and properties, and so the whole business of life comes into the story.¹

Abercrombie calls the epic a form of "wholly-truthful art," which means that the whole river of life, broad as it is, is presented without distortion. Tillyard, following him, speaks of the breadth of outlook demanded of the epic poet:

Granted the fundamental sanity, the wider the epic poet's mental-span, the better. And ideally he should be able to range from the simple sensualities to a susceptibility to the numinous.²

1. Epic and Romance, pl 16.

2. English Epic, p. 8.

Granting this breadth of vision, this comprehensive view, it must not be imagined that an epic can be an undifferentiated and unorganized display of life's many phenomena. Certain modern novels, for example, could never qualify as epics, and this because they fail to exhibit the selection, arrangement and organization that is a mark of the true epic. The epic poet has the "fundamental sanity" which enables him to see all aspects of reality in their right proportion, with serene detachment to match his keen powers of observation.

A fourth requirement for epic is that it have a "high seriousness," a solemn style throughout. The best example of this fourth quality of epic is to be found in Milton's Paradise Lost. Here we find the style that rolls forth like the resounding peals of an organ. No secret is made of the attempt to obtain a majestic sweep of style proper to the great theme which is to be treated. There is included sententia, or words of wisdom and morality. C.S. Lewis points out that Milton's style is a thing of decorum and ritual, a style more properly described by the Middle English word solempne. There is dignity and pomp not because of the writer's vanity but because such is the proper pleasure of ritual:

Epic, from the beginning, is solempne. You are to expect pomp. You are to "assist," as the French say, at a great festal action.... The Epic does not decline from the lay in the heroic court to the Miltonic level, but rises; it accumulates and enriches solemnity as the centuries proceed.¹

1. C.S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost. New York: Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 17.

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There is ritual or ceremony in that which is solemne. It may be joyful but it is always dignified; a deliberate attempt is made to maintain an elevated tone throughout.

It is well to draw a distinction between "oral" and "literary" epic and point out the basic difference in style between the two. An oral epic is meant to be recited by a poet on some festive occasion before a group of listeners; a literary epic is meant to be read privately and at leisure by one who can appreciate it. The Iliad and Beowulf have the oral technique; the Aeneid and Paradise Lost have the literary technique. The question which is superior does not concern us here; we are interested only in how the technique of one differs from that of the other. C.S. Lewis points out that the most obvious characteristic of an oral technique is its continual use of stock words, phrases, or even whole lines. These are to aid the listener, who must not be surprised too often but is carried along by large sweeping effects.¹ The literary epic aims more at a richness and depth of meaning to be pondered over by the solitary reader. C.M. Bowra sums up the difference between the two:

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If the oral epic triumphs through its simplicity and strength and straightforwardness, through the unhesitating sweep of its narrative and a brilliant clarity in its main effects, the literary epic appeals by its poetical texture, by its exquisite or apt or impressive

1. See Preface to Paradise Lost, p. 21.

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choice of words, by the rich significance of phrases and lines and paragraphs.¹

The literary epic has a more pervasive tone of dignity, a more obvious grand style than has the oral epic. This is so because literary epic is meant to be read and therefore tries to compensate for the lack of musical accompaniment, festive atmosphere, etc. which oral epic properly speaking has. There is a great step from the group of warriors hearing a scop recite the alliterative meter of Beowulf to the accompaniment of a harp, to the gentleman of seventeenth century England seated quietly in his study pondering over Paradise Lost. The oral and literary techniques of epic differ because the former is meant to be heard, the latter to be read.

1. C.M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry. London: Macmillan & Co., 1952, p. 5.

CHAPTER II

THE GRAND EPIC THEME

An epic, as we have said must have a great theme that sustains and animates the long poem from beginning, through middle, to end. This "high argument," when properly conveyed through the medium of an appropriate style, is capable of exciting awe or admiration in its hearers. In this chapter we shall examine the theme of all the English mystery cycles, demonstrate its presence in each of them, and end with a discussion of this theme in the Chester Cycle. First, then, we look at the theme and the great cycles.

In England during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries there were at least a dozen prosperous towns which took pride in the annual production of a large cycle of Scriptural plays or pageants.¹ Of this large amount of dramatic writing, besides fragments and individual plays, only four complete groups are extant: those of York and Chester, the Towneley Plays, and the Ludus Coventriae. These four groups of pageants form cycles covering the biblical story gen-

1. The terms "play" and "pageant" are sometimes used interchangeably to designate the self-contained parts of the great cycles; confusion tends to arise, however, when the wagons used as stages are called "pageant-wagons" or simply "pageants." See F.M. Salter, Medieval Drama in Chester. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955, pp. 54 ff. From this point on, for the sake of clarity, "pageant" will consistently be used only to designate the self-contained parts of the cycles, i.e. the "Creation," the "Deluge," etc.

erally, through both the Old and New Testaments, from the "Fall of Lucifer" to the "Last Judgement."¹ There are both similarities and dissimilarities to be noted among the episodes in these different cycles, and comparative studies have thrown light on the content and dramatic value of each;² but one thing they all have in common is the same theme.

There is on the part of readers a tendency to neglect the unity of the cycles, to think of them as random collections of individual stories taken from the Bible and valued either for their didactic or their comic values and turned into a primitive form of drama. It is thought that such plays, if they do have value at all, are to be taken as distinct and autonomous units within a loose collection, somewhat after the manner of the Canterbury Tales. Even when real dramatic value is recognized, it is a common modern practice to single out certain pageants from the different cycles for special praise and, of course, for inclusion in anthologies. Thus it is that the Towneley "Second Shepherds' Play," the Brome "Sacrifice of Isaac," and perhaps the Chester "Noah," for example, are set up as autonomous units and

1. A clear listing of all the extant cycles, plays and fragments of medieval English drama is given by Arnold Williams in The Drama of Medieval England. Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press, 1961, pp. 55 ff. For a scholarly and comprehensive listing of studies in the field, see Carl J. Stratman, ed., Bibliography of Medieval Drama. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954, 423 pp.

2. See Williams, op. cit., pp. 66-90.

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spoken of, along with Everyman, as typical medieval dramas. It may or may not be true that some of the best of the cycles is included in such selections; it might well be contended that, for instance, the Towneley "Resurrection" pageant is more valuable, with its beautiful and touching lyricism than is the robust, and at times farcical, "Second Shepherds' Play." The point is that there is a danger of losing the central truth and theme in this tendency to separate individual pageants from their context and to approach them, as Prosser does in her Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays, as if they existed in their own right, and were meant to be performed independently, in such manner as Lear say, or Hamlet.¹ The simple fact is that single mystery pageants were meant by their creators to be performed as parts of a larger cycle, that each short pageant found its significance in the cosmic story.

This central theme of the cycles is the salvation of man. Every cycle of plays gives a panoramic view of the story of man and the meaning or significance of his existence. Everything leads up to and evolves around the apex and central point, which is the redemption of mankind, through the sufferings and death and triumph of Christ, the central Figure. The background is presented; then comes the

1. "An entire mystery cycle should not be considered as one play.... The intervals between plays was a total break.... We must remember that each play created a separate impression." Eleanor Prosser, Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1961, pp. 54-55.

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immortal story, in pageant after pageant, of man and his relations with the all-just, all-merciful God he had offended; the salvation of man by the Son of God on Calvary; the teaching of these truths and dispensing of graces by the divinely founded Church; and all finally culminating in the last judgement, when all men receive definitive reward or punishment according to their faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the commandments.

Each great mystery cycle is unified from start to finish by threads of meaning that run through the numerous biblical scenes which have been judiciously selected and which contribute to the central theme. The origin of this unity is to be found in the liturgy of the Catholic Church, from which the mystery cycles developed. The first pageants evolved around the two highpoints of the liturgical year, the Nativity and the Resurrection. The cycles were gradually amplified from these centres. The birth of Christ, for example, called for some explanation. If Adam and Eve had not fallen, man would not have been in need of redemption. A scene was needed showing the temptation of Eve by Satan in the garden of Eden. But why did Satan tempt Eve? Out of malice for having been driven out of heaven. Why was he driven out of heaven? That also must be told.⁴ Gradually, therefore, the main outlines of the whole Christian story came into

1. See Albert C. Baugh, "The Beginnings of the Drama," in A Literary History of England (ed. Albert C. Baugh). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948, p. 276.

being in a cycle, a cycle whose central and most important episodes were the the Nativity, Passion, and Resurrection and whose most important Figure Christ.

The salvation theme of the mystery cycles is based upon sound Christian doctrine. Theology tells us that the pivotal event of human history according to God's eternal plan is the Incarnation culminating in the redeeming death and Resurrection of the Son of God made man. The Old Testament looked forward in anticipation to this focal event of human history, the coming of the Messiah, while Christians now live in the New Dispensation, looking back in joy and gratitude. This turning-point of human history is celebrated by the liturgy so that the saving event may be relived over and over again in Christians' lives.¹

For the Christian, perception of the full breadth of God's magnificent plan reveals two basic insights: first, there is a splendid unity of God's design for men; and second, the principle of this unity, the central role of Jesus Christ. Regarding the second insight it may be said that the source of Christian hope is Christ, the God-man. His redemptive act is the basis for hope; in His death and Resurrection Christians see their final victory in union with Him. At the focal point of history the Son of God illumines the past, the present, and the future. As Christ himself explained when speaking of His Mission

1. See Vincent M. Novak, "Teaching Salvation-History," in The Bible Today, 2, (1962), p. 117.

in the world: ~~WI~~ I am the light of the world."¹

There is a parallel between the general structure or sweep of the cycles, and that of the liturgy of the Church. Just as the liturgy in its cycle builds up to Christmas, ebbs, then rises to the highpoint of Easter, so the mystery cycles build up to the Nativity pageants and rise to their peak with the Passion and Resurrection. The mysteries in England were played on the feast of Corpus Christi. Craig points out that the service of Corpus Christi is theologically and ritualistically a consummation of the entire plan of salvation, and the grand cycle of religious themes from the fall of Adam to the Ascension of the Saviour and the Passion-play theme as developed at Easter was a presentation of the same grand theme. Craig goes on to say that it epitomized the service of the liturgical-year:

Indeed, the plays as well as the service of the day may be said to portray the entire plan of salvation, culminating in Christ's sacrifice and always conscious of the types of Christ among the patriarchs. The service also presents in what were originally liturgical terms the subject of prophecy and the circumstances of its fulfilment in the birth of Jesus. It is the same great and familiar story of the fall and redemption of man as that which we have in epics, sermons, commentaries, and histories all through the Middle Ages.²

Here is the whole Christian cosmos in perspective, beginning, middle

1. See Novak, op. cit., p. 117.

2. Hardin Craig, English Religious Drama. London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 133.

and end, based upon the liturgy, parallel in structure to the liturgy, and dramatically presented at the most appropriate time during the liturgical year.

This is the "great argument" of the mysteries. It is almost an understatement to point out its spaciousness and elevation. F.M. Salter bears witness to its epic grandeur:

The mystery plays had the advantage over all literature except the Bible, Dante, Milton, and a few minor authors, of the grandest, most sublime, and most powerfully moving of all themes.¹

This is indeed a fit subject for epic. It deals with the most important and fundamental question men have ever asked, namely, what is the meaning of existence? A germinal answer comes back in the words of God the Father in the opening lines of all the extant mystery cycles;

"Ego Sum Alpha et O."

All four of the complete mystery cycles we know have basically the same majestic plan ranging from Creation and the fall of man, through the Redemption, to the Last Judgement. Each opens with a long dignified speech by God the Father, setting the stage for the cosmic story which is to follow. The opening lines of the York Cycle are typical and worth quoting here:

Ego sum alpha et O, Vita, Via,
Veritas, Primus et Novissimus.

1. Medieval Drama in Chester, p. 83.

I am gracious and great, God without a beginning;
 I am maker unmade, and all might is in me.
 I am life and way unto weal winning;
 I am foremost and first; as I bid shall it be.¹

These are merely the first half-dozen lines of a long passage which leads into the creation of the angels and earth. It is a speech of the highest self-praise, yet it is neither ranting nor boastful. There is communicated a sense of great beauty and dignity; the ponderous march of alliterative verse gives the impression that something momentous is about to take place. In this way the great argument is initiated, then played out its full length. Even though there are minor variations in construction and in number of plays, the single great plan of salvation is never lost sight of in all the extant mystery cycles.

A brief look at the cycles will indicate in what manner the central theme of salvation is dealt with in each. The York and Towneley plays are more closely related than any other two groups.² In both of them the first explicit allusion to the central idea is contained in connection with the prophets who look forward to Christ's coming. The doctor in the York Cycle speaks of God's great plan of salvation as read in the prophet Amos:

His Son he said that he should send
 To take kind of man's kin
 In a maiden full mild.
 So was many saved of sin,
 And the foul fiend beguiled.³

1. J.S. Purvis, ed., The York Cycle of Mystery Plays. London: S.P.C.K., 1957, p. 15.

2. See Craig, op. cit., pp. 199 ff.

3. York Cycle, p. 79.

The prophet Sibyl of the Towneley Plays speaks of Christ and His great achievement in somewhat the same manner as one would speak of an epic hero:

All men was slayn through adam syn,
And put to pyne that neuer shall blyn,
through falseness of the feynd;
A new kyng comes from heuen to fyght
Agans the feynd, to wyn his right,
so is his mercy heynd.¹

Throughout both the York and Towneley plays references to the theme of salvation are numerous, and both have striking statements of the theme by Christ Himself during the Crucifixion and the Harrowing of Hell.

In the York Cycle Christ gives no speech at His Resurrection; the theme speech of the Towneley Resurrection with its great beauty is very closely related to that of Chester. These basic similarities plus the general similarity of structure serve to indicate that, in spite of obvious differences in metrics and form in the three cycles of York, Towneley and Chester, the great central theme of salvation is common to them all.²

The Ludus Coventriae differs somewhat from the other three

1. George England, ed., The Towneley Plays. London: Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 62.

2. The York cycle has forty-nine pageants, the Towneley thirty-two, and the Chester twenty-four. The York pageants are notably short and those of Chester long, with each including many different episodes. It is generally believed that the number of different pageants in any given cycle was apt to vary according to the number of guilds capable of and willing to produce them. The city of York which had numerous active guilds also had numerous different pageants in its cycle. In this connection see Craig's English Religious Drama, p. 202.

cycles in composition. It has a great deal of variety and learning, and the cycle as we know it seems to be an assembly of at least three different pieces: a Corpus Christi cycle, a St. Anne's day play on the life of the Virgin, and a two-part passion play, the parts given in alternate years on a multiple stage.¹ It is because of the added interest in the Virgin Mary in the Ludus Coventriae that its play of prophets deals with the Root of Jesse theme. The prophecies point forward, with stress on the Mother of the Messiah, and the whole aim appears to be her honour. A few of the phrases used by the prophets will indicate this:

A flowre xal blome of me jesse rote...

A clene made trede down foule sathanas...

So xal a maydyn be modyr of blyss...

All our myrth comyth of a mayd....²

But this is merely a question of emphasis. The great central theme is present in this cycle as well as in the others. The Blessed Mother is especially honoured, but at the Resurrection Christ explicitly states the purpose of His coming, just as He does in the other cycles:

I lyght out of my faderys trone
ffor to Amende mannys mone
my flesch was betyn to the bon
my blood I bledde clere.³

1. See Williams, op. cit., p. 61.

2. K.S. Block, ed., Ludus Coventriae or the Plaie Called Corpus Christi. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1960, pp. 58-59.

3. Ibid., p. 320.

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The Ludus Coventriae, like all three of the other mysteries, gives a panoramic view of the whole Christian cosmos. Everything is included: God, Satan, Adam, Christ, the Creation, the fall of man, the Passion, Resurrection, and Last Judgement -- all characters and events serving to bring out dramatically the greatest and most central theme, that of salvation of the race through the redeeming act of Christ, the Christian Hero par excellence.

Having pointed out the way in which all the mystery cycles are unified around the epic theme of salvation, its derivation from the liturgy, and its sound basis in Christian theology, we looked briefly at how this central idea is present in each of the cycles. It is time to narrow down to take a closer look at the Chester Mystery Cycle itself.¹

In the Chester Cycle, as in all the others, the salvation of man is brought about by the sufferings and death of Christ.

1. There are extant no less than five manuscripts of the Chester Cycle as a whole, two manuscripts of single pageants, and a small fragment of another pageant. The five manuscripts are the following:

- D. 1596. Huntington Library.
- W. 1592. British Museum Add. MS. 10305.
- R. 1600. British Museum MS. Harley 2013.
- B. 1604. Bodleian MS. S.C. 175.
- H. 1607. British Museum MS. Harley 2124.

Dr. Hermann Deimling's edition of the cycle for the Early English Text Society is taken from this last MS., Harley 2124. See "Introduction" in The Chester Plays. London: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. vii. The present study is based upon this standard edition.

The crucifixion is a tragedy. The action of the cycle builds up gradually but inevitably to "Christ's Betrayal" and through the sufferings of the "Passion" to the climax when Christ dies on the cross. The Chester "Passion" treats all that happened from Christ's betrayal by Judas to His finally being laid in the sepulchre by Joseph and Nicodemus.

The "Passion" opens when Christ is hailed before Annas and Caiphas and questioned and mocked simultaneously. The first few words of Annas set the action rolling:

A langling Iesu, art thou here?
now may thou proue thy power,
whether thy cause be clean and clear,
thy cristhood we shall knowe.¹

It is an understatement to say that the trial is not a just one. The Jews have Christ in their power, so they think, and they are determined at any price to have Him destroyed. They mock and ask questions only in order to trap Christ; an excuse must be found for the crucifixion, but the crucifixion must take place. After the preliminary period of questioning and insults, Annas and Caiphas lead Christ to Pilate, who tries to dodge responsibility by sending Him on to Herod:

Goes! lead him to Herode in hye,
and say I send to iustifye
this man of which he hase maistry,
at his owne lyking.²

During this new ordeal Christ maintains His dignity and patience and

1. Chester Plays, p. 280.

2. Ibid., p. 286.

denies Herod the compliment of a single word of response. Because of this Herod thinks Christ is insane and therefore clothes Him in white:

Cloth him in whyte for this case,
to pilate it may be solace,
for Iews custome before was
so to cloth men that be wodd.¹

Having returned to pilate Christ is again mocked and beaten, and a choice is given by Pilate to free Christ or a murderer called Barabbas; but Annas and Caiphas hold to their demands for Christ's death:

Cayphas

but thou neile him to the tree,
the Emperour full wroth will be.

Annas

All we say, right as sayeth he:
deme him whyle thou hast teme.

Pilate

whether of them would ye hane,
Christ Iesu or Barabban?

Cayphas

May Iesu, that traytor that is tane,
must neiled be on the tree,
and let Barabbas goe his way.²

Pilate gradually bends under the pressure, and after he condemns Christ Annas and Caiphas accompany the torturers on the way to Calvary. The tragedy becomes more and more inevitable now as it moves

1. Chester Plays, p. 288.

2. Ibid., pl 295.

relentlessly to its climax. The jeers and Buffetings of the Jews keep the sufferings of Christ intense, and they reach their most intense pitch with the naked brutality of the actual crucifixion. The torturers have just finished dicing for Christ's garments; Caiphas is impatient and orders them to be about their ghastly business:

Cayphas

Men, for Cockes face!
How longe shall poydrace
stand naked in this place?
goe, neyles him to the Tree!¹

The torturers answer casually, then undertake their task with a heartless delight:

Second

anon, maister, anon;
a hammer haue I one,
as farr as I haue gone,
ther is not such an other.

Third

and here are, by my pon!
neiles, very good wone,
to neyle thervpon,
though he were my Brother.

Fourth

Goe we to hit fast!
this Caytyfe I have cast,
shall be wronge wrast,
or I wend away.

First

here is a rope will last
for to draw a maste.

1. Chester Plays, p. 303.

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this Poplard neuer past
so perilous a play.

Second

Lay him thervpon,
this ilke mased mon,
and I shall dryve on
this neile to the ende.

Third

As broke I my pon,
well cast him I can,
he shall be well wonne,
or I from him wend. (Tunc ponent Iesum super Crucem)

Fourth

ffellows, will ye see
how sleight I will be,
this fyst or I flye,
here to make fast?

The Body of Christ is not big enough for the cross:

First

yea, but as mott I thee,
short Armed is he;
to bringe to this tree
it will ntt long last.

Second

ha! therfore care thou nought,
a sleight I haue sought,
Ropes must be brought,
to strean him with strength.

Third

a Rope, as behight,
you shall haue, vnbought;
take here one well wrought,
and draw him on length.

(tunc ligabunt Cordam ad sinistram manum quia destra erat prius fixa)

Through all of this Christ remains silent, and the torturers proceed:

Fourth

Draws, for your father kynne!
 whyle that I dryve in
 this ilke Iron pinne,
 that, I dare lay, will last.

First

as ever haue I wyne,
 his Arme is but a fynne;
 now dryves on, but dyn,
 and we shall draw fast.

(Tunc tres trahent et quartus transfiget Clavem)

Second

ffellows, by this light!
 now if his feet were pight,
 this Gommon went aright,
 and vp he should be raysed.

Third

That shall be done in height,
 anone in your sight;
 for my trothe I plight:
 I deserve to be prayсед. (Tunc pedes transfigent)

Fourth

fellows, will ye see,
 how I haue stretcht his knee?
 why prayse you not me
 that haue so well done?

First

yea, help now that hee
 on height raysed be;
 for, as mott I thee,
 almost it is none.¹

1. Chester Plays, p. 305.

At this point Pilate arrives with a plaque to be nailed to the cross with the words, "Jesus of Nazareth, kinge of Iewes."¹ The Jews object briefly to this but are denied by Pilate, then the cross is raised. As Christ hangs dying on the cross the action calms somewhat as Mary, His Mother, weeps:

Alas! my love! my lyfe! my lee!
 Alas! mowrning now madds me.
 Alas! my Boote looke thou be,
 thy mother that thee bare!
 Thinke on my freut! I fosterd thee,
 and gaue the sucke vpon my knee;
 vpon my payne haue thou pittie!
 thee fayles no power.

Alas! why ne were my lyfe forlorne?
 to fynd my foode me before
 Tugged, Lugged, all to-torne
 with Traytors, now this tyde?
 With neiles thrust, and Crown of Thorne,
 therefore I madd, both even and morne,
 to see my birth that I haue borne,
 this bitter Bale to byde.²

Even as Mary Magdalene and two other women weep with Mary, the Blessed Mother, Annas and Cayphas present a contrast as they continue to mock Christ:

Maria Salome

Alas! that ever I borne was,
 to se my lord in such vnpeace,
 my sorrow will never slake ne cease,
 such sorrow is me vpon.

Annas

Now this shrew is hoven an height,
 I would se for all his sleight,

1. Chester Plays, p. 306.

2. Ibid., p. 306.

for his Croune how he would feight,
 and fownd from vs to flee.
 He that hath healed so many one,
 now Saue him self, if that he can,
 and we shall leeven him vpon,
 that godes sonne is he.¹

Christ reacts with a beautiful appeal to God the Father that stands out in stark grandeur above all else:

ffather of heaven, if they will be,
 forgeue them this they done to me!
 they be blynd, and may not see,
 how fowle the do amisse.²

As the mockery continues Christ forgives the good thief, speaks to Mary, His Mother, and to John the Evangelist, then, at the moment of death He presents His soul to the Father:

Almighty God in maiesty,
 to worch thy will neuer wond;
 my spirit I betake to thee;
 receive it, lord, into thy hand.³

After Christ's death, Longeus, a blind soldier, is unwittingly induced to pierce His side with a spear and is miraculously enabled to see. The action subsides gradually after its climax, and ends calmly with the burial. The tragedy has reached its close.

Christ, like Beowulf, is the Hero Who suffers for His people, and Who by His death brings a tragic action to its climax. We have

1. Chester Plays, p. 309.

2. Ibid., p. 209.

3. Ibid., p. 212.

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pointed out that the crucifixion is a tragedy; but it is not a defeat, for by it the forces of evil are conquered, and this is dramatized in the Chester Cycle's "Descent into Hell." The smashing down of Hell's gates and defeat of the dreadful fiend in awful conflict is an exploit worthy of the greatest of epic heroes. If the "Passion" was dramatic the "Descent into Hell" is dramatic also, but in a different way. Let us examine it at some length.

After the patient endurance and serene dignity sustained by Christ during His passion -- and after the emotions of the audience have been given time to quiet, during the burial episode -- the dramatization of Christ's greatest battle is presented in the "Descent into Hell." This pageant held special interest for a medieval audience. After the agony and apparent defeat of the crucifixion the "Descent into or Harrowing of Hell" at last shows Christ, the Hero, coming face to face with the powerful instigator of evil himself, Satan. The great purpose of Christ's taking upon Himself human nature in the first place was to free men's souls from the clutches of the fiend. For centuries the event promised by God and foretold by the prophets was to take place, the Champion of mankind was to combat the deadly enemy. Deep in this region of darkness, suffering and slavery, Adam, speaking for mankind salutes the Light of Christ approaching:

A lord and Severayne Saviour,
our Comfort and our Counselor,
of this light thou art Author,
as I se well in sight.
this is a Signe, thou would succour
thy folke that bene in great langour,

and of the Devill be Conquerour
as thou hast yore behight.¹

Satan and his crew gird their loins for the coming battle. Satan encourages his warriors:

Hell hownds, all that be here,
make you bowne with Bost and Bere,
for to this fellowship in feere
ther hyes a fearly freak.
A noble morsell you haue mon:
Iesu, that is gods sonne,
comes hither with vs to wonne;
on him now ye you wreake!

A man he is fullye, in faye,
ffor greatly Death he dredd to day,
and these words I hard him say:
"my soule is thirste vnto Death:"
Such as I made halt and Blynd,
he hath healed into ther kynd,
therfor that Boyster looke that you bynde
in Bale of hell Breath!²

As the devils prepare feverishly for the onslaught, Christ interrupts them in the following manner:

Open hell gates anone!
you princes of payn, every chon!
That Gods sonne may in gone,
And the kinge of Blisse!³

The defenders start to lose heart, and they challenge Satan to go forth and fight as a prince should, else they will dethrone him:

Yea, Sathanas, thy Soverainty
fayles cleane, therfore flee,

1. Chester Plays, p. 318.

2. Ibid., p. 321.

3. Ibid., p. 324.

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for no longer in this See
 here shalt thou not sytt.
 Goe forth! feight for thy degree!
 or ells our Prince shall thou not be,
 for now passeth thy postye,
 and hence thou must flitt.¹

Once more Christ calls out a command to open the gates. He will not be kept waiting:

Open vp hell gates, yet I say,
 you Princes of pine that be present!
 and lett the kinge of bliss this way,
 that he may fulfill his intent!²

Then Christ enters Hell. Satan is decisively defeated, and Christ frees the souls of Adam and all those people of the Old Testament who are destined for Heaven. Christ's greatest battle has been won.

The glory of this victory was not lost on the medieval audience. The people of the Middle Ages saw Christ as the Son of God who so loved them that he suffered and gave His life to free them from the bondage of sin. He was their Hero, and in their literature they often saw Him as a great Warrior. As the medieval knight donned armour and colours and went out to fight for a person or cause, so Christ takes upon Himself human nature in the Chester Cycle and goes out to free His people. This analogy is expressed in the parallel

1. Chester Plays, p. 324.

2. Ibid., p. 325.

section of Piers Plowman. Faith is speaking:

This ishesus of his gentrice . wole iuste in piers armes,
In his helme & in his haberiouñ . humana natura,
That cryst be nought beknowe here . for consummatus deus,
In Piers paltok the plowman . this priker shal ryde;
For no dynte shal hym dere . as in deitate patris.¹

But who or what is the enemy? Who shall face the hero in the lists?

"Who shal iuste with ihesus?" quod I . "iuwes or scribes?"
"Nay," quod he, "the foule fende . and fals dome & deth."²

We are apt to forget that the later Middle Ages idealised a heroism peculiar to that time: the will to overcome the effects of Original Sin: that the man who could with stand that menace was rightly regarded as the noblest type of warrior, one who had, in the language of canonisation, proved himself to be in herico gradu virtutis. Thus a medieval poet who turned his thoughts to the subject might well derive from it a sense of spaciousness and a grandeur which we find difficult to appreciate.³

At the Resurrection Christ triumphs with power and majesty in victory over all obstacles, and at the Last Judgement He renders perfect justice to all. He is Knight, King, and Conquerer. Christ the King, the Hero of the Chester Cycle, has conquered the enemy of His people and reigns in justice and majesty for all eternity. His

1. Walter W. Skeat, ed., Langland's Vision of Piers the Plowman. Text B. London: Oxford University Press, 1950, xviii, p. 323.

2. Ibid., p. 323.

3. See Routh, op. cit., vol. II, p. 260.

qualities were adored by the medieval Christian audience. Their attitude may be put rather succinctly in this fashion:

Ac to be conquerour called . that cmmeth of special grace,
And of hardynesse of herte . & of hendenesse bothe.¹

To sum up. Having discussed the theme of salvation or redemption, we showed its presence in each of the extant mystery cycles. Later we narrowed to a study of the Chester Cycle, in order to see how the theme of salvation is presented in it as a tragedy reaching its climax with the crucifixion scene in the "Passion." Finally, we saw how Christ's victory of redeeming men's souls is dramatized in His "Descent into Hell." Chapter three will show how the complete Chester Cycle is unified around the grand epic theme of salvation.

1. Piers Plowman, B, xix, p. 346.

CHAPTER III

UNITY AND CONTROL

The first of four essential requirements for epic is that its author have complete control of his material, so as to keep the action one and continuous throughout. Though the whole is composed of many parts, each has something integral to contribute; thus there is unity around the central theme. Let us examine the Chester Cycle to see if it has this first epic quality of control.

The Chester Cycle has dramatic unity, unity of action around the theme of salvation; it has control commensurate with the amount included. The authors of the mysteries continually kept in mind their purpose and never allowed themselves to stray. As Salter says,

The English plays, and especially those of Chester never get out of hand, never forget their sacred mission.¹

The Chester Mystery Cycle is one long story through all twenty-four of its pageants:

If a play, to be a work of art, must have the 'beginning,' 'middle,' and 'end' claimed for it by Aristotle... then the Fall of Lucifer and the Last Judgement are clearly the 'beginning' and 'end' of this cosmic Christian drama.²

Although in individual pageants there is a tendency to wander away from the central argument into comedy, as in the Towneley "Second

1. Medieval Drama in Chester, p. 96.

2. Glynne Wickham, Early English Stages. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959, p. 315.

Shepherds' Play," there is always very good control of material so as to give one unified impression.

The cycles were amplified by a troop of anonymous writers. It is because of uniformity of outlook and aim on the part of these writers that their finished product is coherent:

A greater marvel than any late composition by a single author would be a theological intelligence motivated by structural imagination that lasted from age to age in the development of a great cycle of mystery plays.¹

The mystery cycles were performed by the guilds, but they never became "secular" in our modern sense of the word. The clergy continued to assist the lay guilds in divers ways, and there is good reason to assume that many of the writers of the pageants were clerics. Because of this continual clerical influence the cycles maintained their character, as extensive but unified artistic expressions, of the religious faith of medieval man.

A single great action moves throughout the two dozen pageants of the Chester Cycle, starting with the beginning of all things, building up to an apex, and concluding with the end of the whole temporal order. Let us trace this action all the way through to show how it is made continuous and unified, especially by such things as prophecy, commandment and vision. For the sake of convenience, the cycle will be divided into five closely related groups of pageants and treated

1. Craig, op. cit., p. 265.

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under the following titles: I. Old Testament, Pageants 1-5; II. Nativity, Pageants 6-11; III. Christ's Public Life, Pageants 12-14; IV. Passion, Pageants 15-21; and V. Last Judgement, Pageants 22-24.¹

I. Old Testament, Pageants 1-5.

The "Fall of Lucifer" starts with the "Ego sum alpha et O" speech by God the Father, showing the Infinite Cause of all things

1. The Chester pageants are preceded by the banns, which were read in the city before the pageants were given as a summons to the audience and as a programme giving the list of the pageants and guilds employed in verse. The following is a list of the complete cycle from the index of the standard Oxford edition, Chester Plays, p. v.

- | | | |
|---------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| I. Old Testament | { | 1. The Fall of Lucifer. |
| | | 2. The Creation. |
| | | 3. The Deluge. |
| | | 4. The Sacrifice of Isaac. |
| | | 5. Balaam and Balak. |
| II. Nativity | { | 6. The Nativity. |
| | | 7. Adoration of Shepherds. |
| | | 8. Adoration of the Magi. |
| | | 9. The Magi's Oblation. |
| | | 10. Slaying of the Innocents. |
| | | 11. The Purification. |
| III. Christ's Public Life | { | 12. Temptation of Christ. |
| | | 13. Christ, Chelidonus and Lazarus. |
| | | 14. Christ's Visit to Simon. |
| IV. Passion | { | 15. Christ's Betrayal. |
| | | 16. Christ's Passion. |
| | | 17. Christ's Descent into Hell. |
| | | 18. Christ's Resurrection. |
| | | 19. Christ Appears to two Disciples. |
| | | 20. Christ's Ascension. |
| | | 21. Sending of the Holy Ghost. |
| V. Last Judgement | { | 22. Prophets and Antichrist. |
| | | 23. Coming of Antichrist. |
| | | 24. Last Judgement. |

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declaring His reason for creation. Lucifer is created and set up as governor of the other angels, he revolts, is cast into Hell, and God determines to create the material world. This action furnishes motivation for Lucifer's later seduction of man. This fact is testified by Lucifer himself in the "Creation":

Ghostelie paradise I was In,
but thence I fell through my sinne;
of earthelie paradise now, as I wyn,
a man is gemen masterye.
By Belzabub! shall I neuer blyn
tyll I may make him by some synne
from that place for to twyn,
and trespase as did I.¹

The first pageant, then, shows the background of conflict between God and the evil forces of rebellion in play before Man's arrival on the scene. The setting is laid and everything prepares the way for and leads up to the "Creation."

In this second pageant God creates the material universe, earth and the skies and all things in them, including the highest earthly creature, man. Man is set in a garden of paradise, and he is seduced to offend God by the envy and malice of the devil. Man is consequently driven from the happiness of paradise to a life of sorrow and care, but even this early the promise of a Saviour is made in God the Father's speech to the serpent. Satan, in form of a serpent, has gained power over the human race through his deception of a woman; later he will be crushed by the seed or offspring of a woman:

1. Chester Plays, p. 27.

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Betwixt thy seade and hers also
 I shall excyte sorow and woe;
 to breake thy heade and be thy foe
 whe shall have maystry aye.¹

Adam teaches his children what he saw in a dream or vision; he looks forward with hope to the Man Who will free the human race from the domination of Satan:

I wott by thinges that I there see
 that God will come from heaven hie,
 to overcome the devill so slie,
 and light into my kinde,
 And my bloude that he will wyn,
 That I so lost for my synne;
 a new law then shall begin,
 and so men shall yt finde.²

After mentioning the destruction of the world Adam goes on to tell about the last Judgement, thus anticipating the final pageant in the cycle:

Also I se as I shall say,
 that god will come the last day,
 to deme mankind in flesh veray
 and flame of fyre burning,
 The good to heaven, the evill to hell.³

Eve's teaching to her children shows the toil and sorrow she has to endure because of sin. The pageant ends with Cain's murder of his brother Abel, a fact which impresses the truth that man's nature has been seriously damaged by Original Sin.

After the "Deluge," which shows God's abhorrence for sin and

1. Chester Plays, p. 33.

2. Ibid., p. 38.

3. Ibid., p. 39.

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His continuing interest in man, the "Sacrifice of Isaac" is initiated by a messenger. The action of this fourth pageant deals first, with the sacrifice of Melchisadech, second, with God's commands to Abraham, and lastly, with the sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham by his obedience becomes father of the chosen race, from which the Saviour will spring:

Wherefore, Abraham, servant free,
 loke that thou be trewe to me,
 and forward ther I make with the
 thy seede to multepli.
 So much more further shalt thou be
 Kingis of thie seed men shall see,
 And one Child of great degree
 all mankind shall forbye.¹

Isaac, in his father's sacrifice, is the victim, and a prototype of Christ, Who by His death is to save all men. "The Expositor," a kind of property man, makes this clear:

This deed you se done in this place,
 In example of Ihesu done yt was,
 that for to wyn mankind grace
 was sacrificised on the rode.²

The deep pathos of Abraham about to sacrifice his son prefigures the great love and mercy of God, Who was willing to see His only Son die to save mankind:

By Abraham I may vnderstand
 the father of heaven than can fand
 with his sonnes blood to break that band
 the Devil and brought vs too.³

1. Chester Plays, p. 70.

2. Ibid., p. 83.

3. Ibid., p. 83.

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The expositor also declares that Melchisadech's sacrifice of bread and wine is a foreshadowing of the renewal of Christ's sacrifice in the Mass:

This offering, I saie verament,
signifieth the new Testament,
that now is vsed with good intent
througheout all Christianitye.

In the old lawe, without leasing,
when these two good men were lyving,
of beastes was all their offering
and eck their sacramente.
but sith Christ dyed on the roode tree,
with bread and wyne him worship we,
and on Sherthursday in his maundy
was his Comaundment.¹

The incidents related in this and in all the pageants dealing with the Old Testament have significance in that they point out and emphasize the coming redemption of mankind. Certain scenes are selected and stressed in order to show the Old Testament as the story of man's relation with his God, while he hoped for the promised Redeemer.

"Balaam and Balak," the fifth pageant, opens with God's revelation to Moses of His ten commandments. The passage is quoted here in full:

Moyses, my servaunte life and deere,
and all the people that be here,
you wott in Egipte when you were,
out of thralldome I you broughte.
I wyll, you honour no God saue me,
ne Mawmentrye none make yee,
my name in vayne nam not yee,
for that me lykes naughte.

1. Chester Plays, p. 68.

I will, you hold your holy daye,
 and worshipp also, by all waye,
 father and mother all that you maye,
 and slaye no man no-where.
 Fornication you shall flee;
 no mens goods steale yee;
 ne in no place abyde ne bee
 falce wytnes for to beare.

Your neighboures wyves covettes noughte,
 servant ne good that he hath boughte,
 oxe ne asse in deede ne thoughte,
 nor any thinge that is his,
 Ne wrongefullie to haue his thinge
 agayne his will and his lykinge;
 in all these doe my byddinge,
 that you doe not amisse.¹

The commandments are the the basis or groundplan of the law of God made known to man, by which man is expected to guide his actions. They are the precepts of the moral order set out plainly early in the cycle as something of a touchstone, a standard by which any man's achievement can be evaluated.

In this same fifth pageant, after some action involving King Balak and Balaam, the prophecies of Balaam, Isaia, Ezekial, Jeremiah, Jonah, David, Joel, and Micheas are dramatically recited, each being commented upon by the "Expositor." They tell of a great King called Emmanual Who will be born of a virgin, and Who will free souls from Hell. The mother of this King will suffer greatly at His death, but He will rise from the grave after three days. Here are a few of these prophecies:

1. Chester Plays, p. 84.

Balaam

Now one thinge I will tell you all,
 hereafter what shall befall:
 a starre of Iacob springe shall,
 A man of Israell.
 He shall overcome and haue in band
 all kinges, dukes of strange land,
 and all the world haue in his hand,
 as lord to dight and deale.

Esayas

I saye a mayden meeke and mylde
 shall conceave and beare a childe,
 cleane without workes wilde,
 to wyn mankinde to wayle.
 But utter and hony shall be his meate,
 that he may all evill forgeat,
 out soules out of hell to get,
 and called Emanuell.

Expositor

Lordinges, these wordes are so veray
 that exposition, in good faye,
 none needed, but you know may
 this work Emanuell.
 Emanuell is as mush to saye
 as "God with us night and day,"
 therefore that name for efer and aye
 to his sonne cordes wondrous well.

Ezechiell

I, Ezechiell, sothlie see
 a gate in Gods house on hye,
 closed it was, no man came nye.
 then told an Angell me:
 This Gate shall no man open, I wis,
 for God will come and goe by this,
 for him self it reserved is
 none shall come there but thee.

Expositor

By this Gate, lords, verament
 I understand in my intent
 that way the holy ghost in went,
 when God tooke flesh and bloode
 In the sweet mayden Mary.
 shee was that gate, wytterly,

for in her he light graciouslie,
mankind to doe good.

Therimia

My eyes must run and sorrow aye,
without ceasing, night and daye,
for my daughter, soth to saye,
shall suffer great anye.
And my folke shall doe, in faye,
thinges that they ne know may
to that mayden, by many waye,
and her sonne, sickerlie.

Expositor

Lordinges, this prophesie, I wis,
touches the passion nothing amisse,
for the prophet see will this
what shall come, as I reade,
That a childe borne of a Maye
shall suffer death, sooth to saye,
and they that Mayden shall afray,
haue vengeance for that deede.

Ionas

I, Ionas, in full great any
to god I prayed inwardlie,
and he me hard through his mercy,
and on me did his grace.
In myddes the sea cast was I,
for I wrought inobedyentlie,
but in a whalles bellye
three dayes saved I was.

Expositor

Lordinges, what this may signifie,
Christ expoundes apertelie,
as we reade in the Evangely,
that Christ him self can saie.
Right as Ionas was dayes three
in wombe of whall, so shall he be
in earth lyinge, as was he,
and rise the thirde daye.¹

1. Chester Plays, pp. 97-98.

David, Joel, and Micheas continue on to tell of the Ascension, descent of the Holy Ghost, and of the place of Christ's birth, and finally the "expositor" gives a general review of all. These prophecies are important elements in the control which is maintained in the cycle; they anticipate the major incidents pertaining to Christ and give us a sense of unity of structure. Thus, the prophecies are an important part of the general build-up in the cycle, which reaches its apex in the Passion and Resurrection.

The great plan of God for salvation of mankind is never forgotten. The Jews cannot be destroyed because in the great plan they are God's chosen people. King Balak has learned this through experience, as he testifies:

Goe we forth! it is no boote
longer with this man to moote;
for God of Iewes is Crope and roote,
and lord of heaven and hell.
Now see I well no man on lyue
gaynes with him for to stryue,
therefore here, a mot I thryue!
I will no longer dwell.¹

There is unity of action or control of material evident here. God is continually in contact with the human race manifesting His will and power. According to His great design all things prepare the way for and lookforward to the coming of Christ.

II. Nativity, Pageants 6-11.

The way has been well prepared when Gabriel opens the sixth

1. Chester Plays, p. 102.

or "Nativity" pageant with the words,

"Haile be thou, Mary, maiden free."¹

Gabriel's is the message that was waited for all through the Old Testament:

conseave and beare, I tell thee,
a childe, his name Ihesu shall be;
so great shall never be none as he,
and called godes sonne.²

Emperor Octavian is interested in news of a King Who is to be born;
therefore, Sibble, his sage, tells him about Christ:

Well I wot for soth, I wis,
that god will bring mankind to blis
and send from heaven -- leeves well this!--
his sonne, our Saviour.
Ihesu Christ, nothing amis,
called he shall be and is,
overcome the Divell and his Coyntre
and be our Conquerour.³

There is no scarcity of references to this great theme. When the scene changes to Bethlehem at Christ's birth, Mary repeats it:

lord, blessed must thou be
that simple borne art, as I see;
to preeve the Dyvill of his posty
comen thou art to daye.⁴

Almost every time Joseph speaks he tells of the purpose of Christ's coming. There are so many explicit references to and repetitions of

-
1. Chester Plays, p. 104.
 2. Ibid., p. 105.
 3. Ibid., p. 119.
 4. Ibid., p. 125.

the theme that it almost seems the authors were obsessed with it.

In the remaining pageants connected with the birth of Christ there is a firm control, an awareness that there is a single important thread of narrative running throughout the cycle. The shepherds of pageant seven, despite their joviality, are aware of the meaning of Christ's coming, and after their adoration of the Child they determine to spread the glad and holy tidings. In pageant eight, the "Adoration of the Magi," a sense of continuity with the earlier part of the cycle is maintained in references to the prophecies of Balaam and Balak:

yea, we that be of Balaams bloud,
that prophesied of that sweet foode
when Balak, that king so wood,
to curse wold he have made
Godes people of Israell.
but power fayled hym every dale,
to prophesie mankindes heale
that tyme hap he had.¹

Having come to worship the Christ-Child the kings know that at last

"fulfilled is Balaams prophesie."²

Herod's doctor reads the prophecies for his master, and in pageant nine, the "Magi's Oblation," when the three wise king~~s~~ come to wroship, they once more refer to the prophecies and rejoice. In pageant eleven, the "Purification," Simeon and Anna speak of the phophecies and the virgin birth:

1. Chester Plays, p. 161.

2. Ibid., p. 163.

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Semion

What Esay sayeth I will see,
for well I wott how it shall be;
or I dyed, well were me of hym to have a sight.

(Tunc librum respiciens legat prophetian: "Ecce virgo
Conncipiet et pariet filium.")

A! lord, Much is thy power,
a wonder I fynd written here:
it sayeth a mayden cleane and cleer
shall conceive and beare
A sonne called Emanuell....

Anna

Semion, father, south I see,
that Christe shall come, our boote to be,
from the father in magistie,
on mankinde for to myne.
and when he cometh, leve thou me,
he will haue mercye and pittie
on his folke, to make them free
and saue them of their synne.¹

Later Christ, now twelve years old, recites the ten commandments before
the doctors in the temple:

That for to doe looke ye be bayne,
with allyour hart in good intent.
take you not his name in vayne,
this is my fathers comaundment.

Also you honour your holy daye,
no workes saue almes-deedes ye doe.
these thre, the certayne sooth to say,
the first table belongen to.
Also father and mother worship aye
take no mans goodes without the right.
all false witnesse you put away;
and slay no man by day nor night.

Envye doe by no woman,
to doe her shame by night or day.

1. Chester Plays, p. 206.

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other mens wyves desire you not;
 all such desires you put away.
 Looke you ne steale by night nor day,
 wheresoever they you be lent.
 these workes understand you may,
 they are my fathers commandment.¹

This signifies that all things, including the law, are to be renewed through Christ. In all the pageants from "Nativity" through "Purification," in spite of diversity of episodes, there is a sense of one continuous story; the one unifying interest which all have is that interest in Christ, the Child Who will redeem us.

III. Christ's Public Life, Pageants 12-14.

Major stress is put upon events related to the two great events of the cycle, the Nativity and the Passion; however, the three pageants showing scenes in Christ's public life do constitute a well-integrated part of the complete cycle. First of this group is pageant twelve, the "Temptation," which Satan introduces with a long speech describing the unparalleled virtues of Christ. Then comes the three temptations of Christ. After these Satan foresees how mankind, represented by Adam, will be freed and he defeated in the "Descent into Hell";

Alas! my sleight now am I quitt,
 Adam I founded with a fitt,
 and hym in combrance sone I knitte
 through quayntice of my crafte.
 Nowe sone out of sorrow he must be shut,
 and I pyned in hell pitt,

1. Chester Plays, p. 215.

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knew I never none of such a witt
as hym that I haue lafte.¹

The action therefore becomes foreknown and inevitable, like that of a tragedy. Christ opens pageant thirteen with a revealing speech:

Brethren, I am filius Dei, the light of this world;
he that followeth me, walketh not in darknes,
but hath the light of lyfe -- the scriptures so record--
as patriarchs and prophetts of me bereth witnes,
both Abraham, Isaac, and Iacob in their sondry testimonies,
vnto whom I was promised, before the world began,
to pay ther ransome and to become man.²

The symblos of light and life are applied to Christ and in this pageant they are used first, in the restoring of the blind man's sight, and second, in the raising of Lazarus. These two symbols are appropriately used, as in the Bible, to convey the fact that Christ's struggle is against the forces of darkness and death. His mission is to bring truth and to save mankind from the spiritual death of sin. With pageant fourteen, "Christ's Visit to Simon," the Pharisees are becoming more and more hostile, and the action leads naturally to the "Betrayal."

IV. Passion, Pageants 15-21.

Seven pageants deal with episodes connected with Christ's Passion. Action is continuous within the group, and there is the familiar awareness of the meaning of the cycle and of the direction in which the great single action is moving.

1. Chester Plays, p. 223.

2. Ibid., p. 230.

Pageant fifteen, the "Betrayal," opens what has been loosely termed the "Passion group." It starts with Christ's invitation to His disciples to prepare for "the feast of Easter." After preparations have been made and all are seated for the pascal supper, Christ announces His purpose:

ffor now a new law I will beginn,
to help mankynd out of his synne,
so that he may heaven wynn,
the which for synne he lost.
and here, in presence of you all,
an other sacrifice beginne I shall,
to bring mankynd out of his thrall,
for helpe him nede I must.¹

Then, after instituting the Holy Eucharest, Christ foretells His betrayal by Judas and denial by Peter, suffers His agony in the Garden, and finally is captured and led off by the Jews.

Pageant sixteen, the "Passion," which was examined in chapter two, is a natural continuation of that which precedes it. The tragedy builds up to its climax. Christ is given an unjust trial, is mocked and beaten, and finally is taken out and crucified with the most horrible of torments. The prophecy of Jeremia is fulfilled as Mary, the Mother of Christ weeps at the foot of the cross:

Alas! my love! my lyfe! my lee!
Alas! mowrning now madds me.
Alas! my Boote looke thou be,
thy mother that thee bare!²

All the other prophecies of the crucifixion are fulfilled and the

1. Chester Plays, p. 268.

2. Ibid., p. 306.

pageant ends quietly with Joseph of Aramathea and Nicodemus anointing the Body of Christ and laying it in the sepulchre.

In the next pageant, the "Descent into Hell," after Christ has freed the good souls, who have laid under the thralldom of Satan since Adam's Fall, The Archangel Michael speaks thus:

Come forth, Adam, come with me!
my lord vpon the Rood Tree
your sinnes hath forbought.
Now shall you have lyking and lee,
and be restored to your degree,
that Sathan with his subtilty
from bliss to bale hath brought.¹

Once more the prophedies have been fulfilled as the freeing of mankind is dramatized. Serious action in this pageant ends with the singing of Te Deum Laudamus by Adam and the souls who have been brought to Heaven.

The focal point of the next pageant is Christ's Resurrection. Pilate sends soldiers to guard the sepulchre to prevent removal of the body. But Christ rises triumphantly before their eyes and gives a glorious and beautiful and powerfully moving speech in which He testifies His great love for man:

from heaven mans sowl I sought
into a Dongeon deepe;
my deere Lemmon from thence I brought,
for ruthe of her I weep.²

After this reference to His descent into Hell Christ goes on to tell

1. Chester Plays, p. 326.

2. Ibid., p. 337.

of His gift of the Holy Eucharist, the soldiers return to Pilate, and Christ appears to several of His friends and disciples. The pageant ends with His forgiving Peter, who had denied Him during the "Passion."

In pageant nineteen, which is something of a lull between the "Resurrection" and "Ascension," Christ appears, unknown, to two of His disciples, Cleophas and Lucas. He answers their questions by referring to Moses and the prophecy of Isais to prove that He has really risen. Later He appears to doubting Thomas and the other disciples, and the pageant ends with Christ's declaration of the necessity of **faith**:

That I am that same body
that borne was of meek Marie,
and on a Crosse your soules dyd bye
vpon good fryday.
Who so to this will consent
that I am god omnipotent,
as well as they that be present,
my Darlinges shalbe aye.¹

Before Christ's coming people looked forward expectantly and hoped; now, after His Passion and Resurrection it is their duty to believe in Him and to avail themselves of the blessings He has brought.

Pageants twenty and twenty-one, the "Ascension" and "Sending of the Holy Ghost," are very closely related to each other and linked structurally with the cycle. They deal with Christ's establishment of His Church; ascent into Heaven, and the descent of the Holy Ghost, Who enlightens and strengthens the disciples. These two

1. Chester Plays, p. 362.

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pageants end the "Passion group" and are the last dealing with the past; the rest of the cycle is a vision of the future.

Having directed His disciples to teach penance and remission of sin throughout the world, Christ, while ascending into Heaven, refers to His sacrifice on the cross and prophecies the last day:

Iesus

I that speake righteousnes,
and haue brought man out of distres;
for Byar I am called and was
of all mankynd through grace.
My people that were from me Rafte,
through Synne and through the Devills crafte,
all that in Hell was.

Angelus tertius

Why is thy Clothing now so redd?
thy body bloody and also heade?
thy Clothes also all that bene lead,
lyke to Pressors of wyne?

Ihesus

for the Devill and his power,
that mankynd brought in great Dangere,
through death on Crosse and bloud so clear,
I haue made them all myne.

These bloody dropps that you may see,
all they freshe shall resarved be,
till I come in my maiesty
to Deme the last day.
This bloud shall witnes bear to me,
I dyed for man on the Rood tree,
and rose with in dayes thre;
such loue I loued them aye.¹

This reference to the Precious Blood anticipates the final coming of

1. Chester Plays, pp. 368-369.

Christ in pageant twenty-four, the "Last Judgement." Christ is to be recognized by His crown of thorns, cross, and Precious Blood. We see here once more the awareness that is kept throughout the cycle of all that has happened up to any given point and of all that will happen after it. The action is controlled in that the author always knows exactly where he is going. It is as if all had been suspended in his mind until the moment of composition.

After Christ's ascent into Heaven His disciples pray for inspiration, and Christ asks His Father to send the Holy Ghost to them. The Father, in a long speech, reviews the action of the cycle and agrees to send the Holy Ghost. Upon being inspired by the Holy Ghost the disciples recite their creed, or spontaneous summary of Christian doctrine. It is also a review of all the more important action of the entire cycle:

Petrus

I Beleue in God Omnipotent,
that made heauen and earth and firmament
with stidfast hart and true intent,
and he is my comford.

Andreas

And I beleue, wher I am lent,
in Iesu, his sonne, from heauen sent,
vereye Christ, that vs hath kent,
and is our Eldars lord.

Iacobus Maior

And I beleue, without boste,
in Iesu Christ, of might moste,
Conceived through the holy ghost,
and borne was of Mary.

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Ihohannes

And I beleue, as I can see,
that vnder Pilate suffred he,
scourged and nayled on Rood tree,
and buryed was his fayr body.

Thomas

And I beleue and sooth can tell,
that he ghostly went to Hell;
deliuered his that ther did dwell,
and rose the thirde day.

Iacobus Minor

And I beleue fully this,
that he stayd vp to heauen blis,
and on his fathers right hand is,
to raigne for euer and aye.

Philippus

And I beleue with hart stidfast,
that he will come at the last
to iudge mankynd, as he hath cast,
both the quick and the dead.

Bartolomeus

And my beleue shall be most
in vertue of the holy ghost,
and through his help, without best,
my lyfe I think to lead.

Mathaeus

And I Beleue, through gods grace,
Such leefe as Holy Church hase,
that god his body graunted vs has,
to vse in forme of Bread.

Symon Zelot

And I beleue with Devotion,
of Sinnes to haue Remission
through Crist his Blood and passion,
and heauen when I am dead.

Thaddeus

And I Beleue, as well we mon,
in the general Resurrection
of ech body, when Christ is bowne
to Dome both good and evill.

Mathias

And I Beleue, as well we may,
everlasting lyfe after my day
in heauer to haue, ever and aye,
and so overcom the Devill.¹

This recital makes pageant twenty-one, the "Sending of the Holy Ghost," a nodal point in the cycle because in it all past action is reviewed and future action foretold.

The doctrine of the Trinity, which is incorporated in orderly fashion in the creed, is notably present throughout the cycle. God the Father is seen as Creator, as Ultimate Source of all things. God the Son, or Christ, is the Second Person of the Trinity Who has died to redeem mankind. Finally, God the Holy Ghost, the Third Person of the Trinity, is Guardian of Holy Mother Church through whom the graces of Redemption are dispensed. The Chester Mystery Cycle is a well-ordered theological structure; the doctrine of the Trinity is an absolutely essential part of this structure.

V. Last Judgement, Pageants 22-24.

This last group of pageants starts with twenty-two, the "Prophets and Antichrist." In it the prophets Ezechiel, Zacharias,

1. Chester Plays, pp. 384-386

Daniel and John the Evangelist tell of their visions of the coming of Antichrist. Pageant twenty-three dramatizes the coming of Antichrist, his deception of the people, his conflict with the prophets Elias and Enoch, and his eventual defeat by the Archangel Michael. All the signs are given; now the way has been prepared for the "Last Judgement."

The final pageant of the cycle, the "Last Judgement" opens with a dignified speech by God similar to ~~that~~ that with which He opened the "Fall of Lucifer." Here are its first few lines:

Ego Sum Alpha et O, Primus et Novissimus.
 I God, greatest of degree,
 In whom beginning none may be,
 that I am Peerless of Posty
 Apertly shall be Proved
 In my godhead are Persons three;
 may none in fay from other be,
 yet Soverayne might that is in me
 may lustlye be moved.¹

Directions are given to the angels to gather all men to be judged; popes, emperors, and kings both good and bad give speeches; and finally Christ comes with His angels and gives a long speech before judging the souls. Christ speaks of His sacrifice and of the shedding of His Blood for man's sake:

After dyed on the rood tree,
 and my blood Shedd, as thou may se,
 to prive the Devyll of his posty,
 and winne that was away.
 The which Blood, behoulds ye,
 fresh houlden till now I would should be,

1. Chester Plays, p. 427.

for certayne poyntes that lyked me,
of which I will now say.¹

Here is found the emphasis on the Precious Blood which we saw in the "Ascension" pageant. After the judgement the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John bear witness to the truth and firm justice of Christ, and the cycle ends appropriately with the joyful words of worship,

"Laus maxima omnipotenti."²

After a survey such as the above it is possible to step back and look at the complete Chester Mystery Cycle to see if its action is unified so as to give the "heroic impression" demanded of epic. The cycle was traced from beginning to end, and these general facts were pointed out: a background for future action is established in pageant one; this leads to pageant two; and from here the action mounts gradually and deliberately to the Nativity, and thence through Christ's public life to the apex of His Passion and Resurrection. From here there was a natural transition to the establishment of Christ's Church, followed by the preliminary drama of Antichrist, and all finally ended with the Last Judgement.

The Chester Cycle has a great unity; and it is guided, throughout the whole cycle from the Fall of Lucifer and the Creation of the World up to the Coming of Antichrist and Judgement Day, by a restraining logic. The result is that the multiplicity of individual pageants does not

1. Chester Plays, p. 441.

2. Ibid., p. 452.

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confuse, but conveys a single overpowering impression of God's might and majesty, His justice, and His mercy.¹

There is one excellently organized, all-inclusive structure in which each and every character and incident has its place; the action is one; it is continuous; and it is great.

1. Salter, p. 105.

CHAPTER IV

CHORIC QUALITY

A second requirement for epic is the choric. If it has a choric quality it will be permeated with the spirit of its time; it will faithfully reflect the dominant core of contemporary ideas. The epic hero is important in that his virtues should be those particularly respected and admired in contemporary society. Epic must be written by a person who is aware of the contemporary spirit, and who is capable of being a spokesman for a great multitude of people, for epic is communal. Epic, besides embodying the "unconscious metaphysic", must be intimately related and attuned to contemporary life. The epic poet should be in intimate contact with all that the large body of people know and experience. He must feel what they see and feel, and he must be able to express their reaction faithfully. This quality of the epic poet is excellently expressed by Tillyard in his discussion of Langland:

It may well be that he was not personally a sociable man; but that did not prevent him speaking with the voice that thousands recognised as their voice. He may have been very much more pious than most of his readers; but that piety of which he may have had more was their piety. He had the keenest eye for the things around him; but the things he saw were what his fellows saw, however much more clearly he focussed them.¹

The scenes of Piers Plowman are based on the reality of day-to-day living, in misery and suffering and in joy and health — they yield an insight into exactly what it was like to be alive at that time.

1. English Epic, p. 158.

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Not every period of history is equally favourable to the production of an epic. Among the conditions necessary at any given time is the presence of one common outlook and language, and there must be a great store of energy, a universal zest for life in all its manifestations. In the England of the mystery cycles these conditions were fulfilled. As Tillyard says, "The late fourteenth century was more propitious to an English religious epic than any time since the Conquest."¹ Now, for the first time since 1066, English became the language of all classes and therefore was capable of voicing the mood of all the people. All things came together to make the period in Tillyard's words, "Greatly alive: an 'epic area,' whether or not it did in fact produce a true epic."²

The Chester Cycle, like the other mystery cycles, developed gradually, and the date of its origin can be roughly placed somewhere toward the latter part of the fourteenth century in England. According to Salter, "Between 1467 and 1540 the cycle grew from eighteen to twenty-six pageants."³ It is the artistic product of medieval English society, which produced the cathedrals, the ballads, and, more closely related to the present study, Piers Plowman. Father L.A. Cornican points out the most important factor in medieval society:

1. English Epic, p. 150.

2. Ibid., p. 149.

3. Medieval Drama in Chester, p. 48.

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Despite surviving elements of paganism, deep strains of coarseness and indecency, and the refusal of many to follow Christian principles, Christianity was without any serious rival in its profound and pervasive influence on life.¹

F.M. Salter says the same thing on this point: "The religion of those times was a living thing which included all life."² The basic philosophy of the time was theocentric; the dominating influence was the Church; and the overwhelming majority of people were Christian; consequently there was a great interest in stories from Scripture, homily and legend.

Tillyard points out that a true medieval epic would have to be religious. He says great as Chaucer was he could not have written a true medieval epic, and this because his interests, as well as the interests of the whole courtly circle of poets, lay largely in things secular, at a time when the age's highest aspirations were to be found in heroic action in an ideal of holiness:

Chaucer is not epic because he is not primarily a religious poet, and though by the end of the fourteenth century the Middle Ages were growing old, the times were still those of religion; only a religious subject could answer their 'unconscious metaphysic.' If there was a core of ideas capable of animating an epic it could only be that religious one of which such divers

1. L.A. Cormican, "Morality Tradition and the Interludes," in The Age of Chaucer (ed. Boris Ford). Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959, p. 188.

2. Medieval Drama in Chester, p. 103.

things as the sermons, the Miracle Plays, a narrative like Curson Mundi, and the decoration of churches were all manifestations.¹

Because of this contemporary religious spirit the medieval epic hero would not be a great earthly warrior but an ideal Christian. Besides virtues like loyalty, courage, and patience, which any hero must have, the Christian hero should also have charity, meekness, humility and mercy.

Has the Chester Mystery Cycle a "choric" quality?— Does it exhibit the essential ideas of its society? Does it bear an intimate relationship with contemporary life?

It has already been shown that the Chester Cycle is a closely-knit theological structure, having for its theme a central tenet of the Christian religion, the notion of salvation. There are a couple of theological points worthy of special attention with regard to the cycle.

In the mystery cycles we see the doctrine that by Christ's act of redemption all men were saved. Christian theology teaches that all men are equal in the sense that each and every individual has an immortal soul made to the image and likeness of God, a soul which has the privilege of sharing in the saving grade of Redemption. In the mystery cycles, just as it is told in the Bible, common rustics have as much cause to rejoice at the birth of Christ as have great

1. English Epic, p. 150.

kings. The lowly shepherds offer their poor gifts just as the great kings offer sumptuous ones, and we may infer that both are of equal merit if offered with a pure heart. In the Chester Cycle Christ's coming is welcomed by all men of good will, the rich, the poor, the learned, and the unlearned. On the last day He renders perfect justice to all, from the lowliest up to pope, emperor and king.

Tillyard points out that however earnestly the most serious thought of the Middle Ages looked to God in heaven, it insisted on seeing God's imprint in earthly creation too. In fact, one great way of seeing God was to study His visible works. So studied, creation presented a wonderful and complicated picture of order. Every item in it had to be given a significant place; and, so placed, not only did it form an indispensable part of the kind of creation to which it belonged, but it corresponded to another item in a different kind. The king was not only a necessary link in the order of the state, he corresponded to the sun in heaven, to the oak among the trees, and the diamond among stones.¹ Tillyard declares that "this hierarchical idea is so paramount in the serious thought of the Middle Ages that no true medieval epic can fail to be permeated by it."² In the Chester Cycle this idea of a vast chain of being, reaching all the way from the highest archangel to lowliest amoeba, is present either explicitly or by inference. Early in the "Fall of

1. See English Epic, p. 143.

2. Ibid., p. 143.

Lucifer" Lucifer voices medieval theology's classification of the angels:

Lord, throughe thy grace and might thou hast us wrought:
Nyne orders of Angelles here as you may see:
Cherubyn and Seraphyn throughe your thoughte,
Trones and Domynacions in blisse to be,
With principatus, that order bright,
and potestates in blissful heighte;
also virtutes through thy great mighte,
Angeli, also Archangeli.¹

This order was created by God, and later it receives His sanction:

Eche one of you kepe well his place,
And, Lucifer, I make the Governour.²

Man is next the angels in the order of creation. In material creation man is above all other creatures, as Christ declares:

because God loveth him aboue his creatures all,
as his treasure and darling most principall,
man, I say agayne, which is his own elect
aboue all creaturs, peculiarly select.³

Among men there is also an order. The shepherds and the Magi and the learned doctors of the temple each have a perfection proper to their class. Such temporal rulers as Herod and Pilate and such spiritual leaders as Annas and Caiaphas are shown as evil men; their high office itself is good and proper, but their evil lies in the abuse of it. All authority comes from God, and each man has his place; these contemporary ideas are present in the Chester Cycle.

If the fundamental principles upon which the cycle is built

1. Chester Plays, p. 10.

2. Ibid., p. 13.

3. Ibid., p. 230.

are common to any Christian society, the devotional tone of the cycle is distinctively medieval. But what is "devotional tone?" A word of explanation. The Church puts more stress on different aspects of the Christian religion in different ages. A few years ago, for instance, there was little stress on lay participation in the Mass; now there is much more. For centuries the idea of receiving the sacrament of Holy Eucharist daily was ^{NOT} strongly encouraged; today it is. When we say that the "devotional tone" of the Chester Cycle is medieval we mean that in it we see where the contemporary stress was put on the eternal Christian truths. In Europe during the Middle Ages there was a particular devotion to the Blessed Virgin; this can be seen in the Chester Cycle's treatment of Our Lady, especially in the emphasis put on her sufferings and on the virgin birth of Christ. People in the Middle Ages were very much aware of the firm justice of God and the terrible consequences of sin; the Chester Cycle has scenes of Hell and the lamentations of the damned, and devils appear on stage to claim the souls of the wicked. Finally, the great attention given in medieval society to the physical sufferings of Christ are duplicated in the Chester Cycle's vivid scenes of the "Passion." These are only a few of the more important examples, but enough to bring out the fact that the cycle is in close contact with the devotional temper of its age. Now we take a brief look at the hero of the cycle to see whether his qualities ^{WERE} admired by the age.

The high ideals of medieval society are personified in the Hero of the Chester Cycle, Christ. The first direct confrontation

between Christ and the devil is in the "Temptation." Here the strong personality of Christ is shown forth in relief as He triumphs with wisdom and courage. Wailing in defeat, Satan bears witness to the strength of his Conqueror:

Out! alas! now me is woe
for found I never so mickle a foe,
though I to threpe be never so thro,
I am overcome thrye.¹

In this very same pageant in the incident of the adulteress, as if to maintain a balance in virtues, Christ's charity and mercy are portrayed. Even in the reading one can visualize the white-clad Figure moving about, in contact with both pure spirits and earthly men, everywhere exhibiting all that the Christian society believed and believes to be admirable and worthy of emulation.

As His Passion draws nearer, the impression that Christ is the most important Character becomes clearer. In the midst of those who conspire against Him, the merchants, the Pharisees, and Judas, the character of Christ stands out. In the "Betrayal" pageant, He gives a lesson in humility by washing the feet of the apostles.. Upon His arrest Christ remains calm, dignified, and obedient to the Father's will and demonstrates love for His enemies even as those around Him lose their composure. Again in the "Passion" pageant there is a quiet dignity in the face of insults, and patience during cruel torments. Such a Character has something more than a simple nobility

1. Chester Plays, p. 223.

which dominates all ~~w~~ho surround Him. Along with the qualities common to every epic hero, the Christ of the Chester Cycle has the positively Christian virtues of charity, humility, meekness, and mercy.

The Chester Cycle is a social form of art drawing upon the common pool of legendary material, and, like any epic, it is closely related to contemporary life. The cycle was composed by unknown authors, performed as a community project, and enjoyed great and lasting popularity. The pageants contained much of the common lore and played on a thousand chords of association in the life of the people. In precisely what way is the cycle related to contemporary life?

The Chester Cycle, like the other mystery cycles, is the result of a century-long process of incremental amplification by anonymous writers, probably clerics; and it was produced and performed annually on the feast of Corpus Christi,¹ by the separate guilds of the town. A closely-knit group of pageants which had originated in this fashion, performed regularly, would naturally come to be regarded as common property and as a source of pride to the entire community. As time passed, interest mounted and preparation became more and more elaborate; consequently, the mystery cycle became extremely expensive to produce and required the zealous effort of all. The mysteries ref-

1. Craig says the Chester Cycle was at first acted on Corpus Christi day but was shifted probably by 1447 to Whitsuntide. He says this shift was made in order to avoid interference with the Corpus Christi procession. The pageants were acted on three successive days in Whit week -- nine on Monday, nine on Tuesday and seven on Wednesday. See English Religious Drama, p. 166.

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lected the thoughts of the people, and they were close to the hearts of the people. This fact is demonstrated by the extreme popularity which the mysteries enjoyed:

Evidence is overwhelming that the common people responded to the plays with an enthusiasm and devotion perhaps unmatched in the history of the theater.¹

There is clear evidence that in at least twelve cities in England during the Middle Ages the entire population turned out to participate in a community drama based on religious faith. Prosser says a national audience of such size may be rivaled only by the one that attended the festivals of Dionysus, but she says that even the theater of Athens cannot approach the mystery cycle in its total involvement of the community.²

The pageants are based upon the liturgy, and the direct source of the liturgy is the Bible; however, in the cycles we find accounts of incidents which have no scriptural warrant but are rather part of the popular folklore of the time. Such incremental material became part of the legends of the people and were to be found grouped into such things as the "New Testament Apocrypha" and the Cursor Mundi. Literary scholars are apt to use the word "source" in a highly restricted sense, to mean only these written works. Written sources are important, of course, but just as much so are the graphic and

1. Prosser, op. cit., p. 3.

2. See Ibid., p. 5.

plastic arts, social customs and attitudes, folklore and folkways. One of the strengths of the English cycle plays is that they are built out of the totality of experience of the medieval communities which supported them.¹

The Chester Cycle furnishes several examples of the use of what may broadly be termed legendary material. In the "Nativity" the story of the midwives, including the punishment of Salome and her miraculous cure, is taken from the pseudo-gospel of St. James. In the "Slaying of Innocents" pageant the incident of the falling Egyptian idols is from the apocryphal Infancy of Jesus Christ. Finally, in the same play the story of Herod's own son being killed by mistake, as a kind of poetic justice, is ultimately from the Saturnalia of Macrobius. The horrors of the "Passion" are very much influenced by the vivid account in the Meditations of the Passion by St. Bonaventure.² All of these works are part of the common stock of materials that a medieval poet had readily at hand when composing the pageants. There was no hesitation about borrowing, of course, for judicious selection, arrangement, and embellishment of the well-known was prized more than was originality in the modern sense.

Besides those things which can be traced to a definite

1. For a more detailed account of the written sources of the mystery cycles, see Williams, op. cit., pp. 116 ff.

2. See Craig, op. cit., pp. 151 ff.

source there are many others which are rather drawn from indefinite sources, from the living strata of ideas of the time. It is not correct to go so far as Owst, who sees the mystery pageants as dramatized sermons,¹ but it is correct to say that homily and pageant shared a common stock of ideas. It is possible that such things, already mentioned, as the pathos of the Passion, unrelieved horrors of Hell, and cruelty of demons in the cycles were influenced by the rhetoric of popular preachers. The cycles were a living part of the life of the people, and they contain much of the unwritten flux of sentiments and emotions that the audience knew and felt.

The Chester Cycle contains two stock situations easily recognizable by a medieval audience. The first is that of the shrewish middle-aged wife, seen in Noah's wife of the "Deluge" pageant; the second is that of the old doting husband and his young and attractive wife, seen in Joseph and Mary. These types are conventional and were particularly used in the Middle Ages. Chaucer's Wife of Bath can be compared to Noah's wife, and the old-husband-young-wife motif is illustrated by January and May in the Merchant's Tale. The words of Joseph in the Chester Cycle could have been spoken just as naturally, and with infinitely more justification, by January:

god let never an old man
take him a yonge woman,
ne set his hart her upon
lest he beguiled be!²

1. See G.R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961, pp. 471-548.

2. Chester Plays, p. 110.

As Williams says, these stereotypes "appear not only in Chaucer but in Langland and a dozen other medieval authors."¹ They are one more contemporary and popular element present in the Chester Cycle.

The medieval outlook on history is seen in the cycles. The medieval world had a more intimate sense of history, a certain feeling of closeness with past and future. Modern man, when he reflects on the past, naturally imagines periods of millions of years, eons of time stretching back behind each other almost ad infinitum. And the future, well, no one knows how it will end. For medieval man history was one long story which had vital significance -- it was true and living and immediate. This is reflected in the mystery cycles:

The York Crucifixion was more than the culmination of a religious festival, more than a colourful act of communal devotion, more than an historic pageant. It was living truth, both past and present. To the citizen of York, this was his forefather Adam, his fall, his Christ Whom he daily crucified again by his sin.²

In other words medieval thinking is characterized by a sense of community, not only in the here and now, but in relation to the past and to the future. The cosmic drama of the mystery cycles is one reflection of this thinking.

An observable and important trait of all the mystery cycles is their presentation of historical events in terms familiar to their medieval audience; often this practice leads to transformation of

1. Drama of Medieval England, p. 121.

2. Prosser, p. 14.

strict historical fact. Thus we find a messenger to the court of Roman Emperor Octavian, before the Nativity, praying in this manner:

that lord that dyed on good fryday,
he save you all, both night and daye!¹

Again, Christ, even before His Passion, speaks these words to His disciples:

The feast of Easter, you know draweth neare,
and now it is at hand.²

All the characters in the cycles are medieval figures. Annas and Caiaphas are "Sir Bishoppes;"³ the Magi are medieval kings; and the shepherds come from medieval Chester. Note the opening speech of the "Adoration of the Shepherds":

O wouldes haue I walked full wylde,
under Buskes my bower to buylde,
from stif stormes my sheepe to sheild
my same~~thy~~ wedders to save,
from Comelie Conway unto clyde
under Tildes them to hyde.
a better Shepherd on no side
no earthlie man may haue.⁴

Such historical freedom was not only tolerated, it was deliberately fostered. The dominant principle in the cycles is constantly the establishment of a common ground between Scriptural story and the personal experience of the audience. Both history and dogma have to

1. Chester Plays, p. 112.

2. Ibid., p. 265.

3. Ibid., p. 280.

4. Ibid., p. 132.

be fitted out in familiar garments. This process we may call "artistic anachronism."¹

An interesting touch in characterization of kings and other rulers in the cycles is their use of French. At this time in England the French language was the language of culture, fashion, and education, spoken in courtly circles.² To be able to speak French was a mark of refinement and distinction. Recall that Chaucer's Prioress was proud to lisp some French, even if it was of the provincial dialect not altogether as "pure" as the language of Paris. In the Chester Cycle added vividness and a sense of familiarity is given to the three wise kings, who greet each other in the language of gentlemen:

1 king

A, Sir Roy, si vous plaist,
Gardez sus sur voutre test!

2 king

une essteile issi est
Que sur vous repleist

3 king

A loys soyt luy une semblant
de une virgin portant,
Comm le semble de une Infant
embrace apportement.³

1. Williams, p. 123.

2. For an authoritative treatment of this subject, see Albert C. Baugh, A History of the English Language. Second Edition. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957, pp. 150 ff.

3. Chester Plays, p. 162.

Herod too regards himself as noble, greeting the kings like this:

Bene soys venues, Roys gent!
me dites tot vesture intent!¹

Use of French in this way in the mystery cycles is one more example of how the cycles played upon chords of association in the minds of their audience.

Another interesting point is the use of "Mahound" in the cycles. The Chester Herod worships Mahound witness excerpts from his ranting speeches:

That is false, by Mahound full of might!²
but by Mahound! that boy shall dye under my hand³
By Mahound, full of mightes!⁴

Herod is a pagan, therefore a non-Christian. The non-Christians most familiar to Western Europeans of the time were the followers of Mohammed, who were thought to worship an idol called Mahound. The dramatic point is that Herod was a pagan, moreover a villainous one engaged in persecuting the great Christian, Christ Himself, and the point is indisputably made when Herod swears by Mahound, however unhistorical such an action may be. Williams says that educated men in the Middle Ages were not so ill-informed as to think that Mohammed was born before Christ. He points out that underneath the anachronism

1. Chester Plays, p. 166.

2. Ibid., p. 171.

3. Ibid., p. 173.

4. Ibid., p. 176.

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we see a pattern and a purpose. The whole attempt of the cycle plays is to dress the great mysteries and the great stories of religion in a garb familiar to their audiences.¹

The final point to be made when speaking of the choric quality of the Chester Cycle is that it has a very intimate contact with and sensitive feel for the daily life of the people:

Even though official revisers from time to time trimmed up the plays, they still come to us incrustated with the living and thinking of real people, dwelling in real towns, experiencing plague and pestilence, rain and sunshine, revelry and tragedy, life, birth, marriage, child-bearing, and decrepitude through generation after generation of brief lives.²

In the words of Owst the cycles "breathed of the English soil."³ The guilds people who staged the plays had a feel for down-to-earth living, a zest for life, and a great deal of practicality. In the Chester Cycle this can be seen in the liveliness of the building of Noah's ark. After Noah gives the order to set to work, his sons and their wives and Noah's own wife answer:

Sem

Father, I am already bowne:
anne axe I haue, by my crowne,
as sharpe as any in all this towne,
for to goe there to.

1. See Drama of Medieval England, p. 123.

2. Salter, p. 102.

Ham

I haue a hatchet wonder-kene
to byte well, as may be seene,
a better grownden, as I weene,
is not in all this towne.

Iaphet

And I can well make a pyn,
and with this hammer knock yt in;
goe and wordhe without more dynne,
and I am ready bowme.

Uxor Noe

And we shall bring tymber to,
for we mon nothing ils doe;
women be weake to vnderfoe
any great travayle.

Uxor Sem

Here is a good hackstock;
on this yow maye hew and knock;
shall non be Idle in this flock,
ne now may no man fayle;

Uxor Ham

and I will soe to gather sliche,
the ship for to cleane and piche;
anoynted yt must be every stich,
board, tree, and pyn.

Uxor Iaphet

And I will gather chippes here
to make a fire for you in feere,
and for to dight your dynner,
against you come in.¹

1. Chester Plays, p. 50.

There is a similar liveliness in the "Adoration of the Shepherds."
The shepherds are full of playful rusticity. Here is some of their
dialogue:

Secundus pastor

Howe, Tud! come for thy father kin!

Primus pastor

Naye! fye! thy voice is wondrous dym.
why! knowest thou not hym?
fye! man, for shame! (tunc vocat voce canora, ut
call hym 'Tud, Tibbs sonne,' antea)
and then well the shrew dome,
for, in good faith, it is his wonne
to love well his dames name.

Secundus pastor

Howe, Tud! Tibbs sonne!

Tertius pastor

Syr, in faith, now I come,
for yet have I not all done
that I have to doe:
to seeth salve for our sheepe,
and, lest my wife shold **it** weete,
with great gravell and greet
I scoure an ould panne.

Hemlockes, and herif--take keepe!--
with Tarboyst most bene all tamed,
penigras, and butter for fat sheepe;
of this salve am I not ashamed.¹

Finally, recall that the torturers of the "Passion" are filled with
joy in their horrible cruelty; they are types perfectly duplicated
in the torture chambers of medieval castles. One of the most realistic

1. Chester Plays, p. 135.

scenes is that showing the death of Herod. As the "Slaying of Innocents" pageant nears its end Herod feels death creeping upon him:

Alas! what the devill! is this to mone?
 alas! my days be now done.
 I wott I must dye soone,
 for damned I must be.
 My legges rotten and my armes;
 I haue done so many harmes,
 that now I see of feendes swarmes
 from hell cominge for me.

I haue done so much woe,
 And never good sith I might goe,
 Therfor I see now cominge my foe,
 to fetch me to hell,
 I bequeath heare in this place
 my soule to be with Sathanas.
 I dye, I dye, alas! alas!
 I may no longer dwell!¹

At this point a very lively and interesting devil arrives to drag off the body. Salter, in his excellent lectures on the Chester Mystery Cycle, suggests that this description of the death of Herod could well have been influenced by popular experience of the terrible plagues which swept England in the Middle Ages.²

To sum up. The latter fourteenth century in England was a fit time for epic. Now because the dominant spirit of the time was Christian, a medieval epic would have to be religious. The Chester Cycle first is religious, being based on medieval theology and philosophy, and second, it has an intimate relationship with contem-

1. Chester Plays, p. 202.

2. See Medieval Drama in Chester, p. 89.

porary life. Therefore it may be concluded that the cycle fully possesses the choric quality of epic.

CHAPTER V

AMPLITUDE

It is a good idea to pause for a moment and look back, first, to get some clear outline of what has been said so far, and second, to look ahead and see in what direction the argument is moving. Chapter I was a study of the nature of epic. It opened with an introductory statement of the method to be used in this paper generally. It discussed the great theme of epic, then went on to enumerate and describe the four essential qualities of epic: 1, choric; 2, amplitude; 3, control; and 4, high seriousness or solemnity of style. Chapter II was a study of the grand salvation theme of all the mystery cycles, with particular attention to its presence at the centre of the Chester Cycle. Chapter III studied how the cycle is unified in action by this theme. Finally, chapter IV showed that the Chester Cycle has a choric quality, first because it reflects the Christian spirit of medieval society, and second, because it is intimately related to the life of real people in fourteenth century England. This fifth chapter will study the Chester Cycle to see if it has the amplitude of epic. The sixth and final chapter will examine the cycle and determine whether it has the necessary high seriousness or solemnity of style. Now we discuss amplitude.

Amplitude and variety of significant episodes are a mark of the true epic and may be observed in the English epics, Beowulf and Paradise Lost. Some episodes at first may seem to have little or no connection with the central argument or movement of the action, but they

do have a function and therefore contribute their share to the total effect. In Hrothgar's mead-hall, before the awful encounter with Grendel, Beowulf is taunted by another warrior, Unferth, and retorts with a boastful speech telling of his daring exploits battling enormous sea-monsters. The gist of his speech is the following:

Then we were together on the sea for the space of five nights till the flood forced us apart, the surging sea, coldest of storms, darkening night, and a wind from the north, battle-grim, came against us.... A hostile deadly foe drew me to the depths, had me firmly and fiercely in his grip; yet it was granted to me that I pierced the monster with my point, my battle spear. The rush of battle carried off the mighty sea monster by my hand.¹

So far as the narrative is concerned this digression is perhaps not necessary, but dramatically it throws light on the daring and heroic character of Beowulf; he is built up more and more as a hero to be admired by any Anglo-Saxon. In Paradise Lost the march of the narrative is halted in Books IV and V while the Archangel Raphael relates to Adam all the different stages in Lucifer's revolt and fall from heaven. This is the epic method. An epic is not a two-hour play or a short story; it is the leisurely presentation of a long-spun-out story.

At first reading it becomes evident that the Chester Mystery Cycle has the quality of amplitude to a more than adequate degree.

1. Beowulf in Anglo-Saxon Poetry (ed., E.K. Gordon), p. 13.

The most obvious thing which can be said about the cycle is that it has a wide span. Covering, as it does, all the major incidents of the Bible story, from "Fall of Lucifer" to "Last Judgement," it shows God, the world He created, Satan, Mankind, and the Christian story involving these figures. Wickham is right in saying that "within this framework the scope for developing particular stories, individual characters, and special problems is vast."¹ There seems to have been a natural tendency to amplify on the part of authors of the mystery cycles. With the passage of time whole new pageants were added and shorter episodes worked into the pageants already existing. As one critic observes:

Any cycle will have at least one pageant found in no other; it will develop scenes just hinted at in the others; it will find motivations not discoverable elsewhere; and it will have its own unmistakable dramatic construction and tone.²

It is interesting to study the variety of different pageants and how they correspond to one another in the four great mystery cycles.³ In the Chester Cycle a very multitude of diverse characters, incidents, and prevailing moods are present in the different pageants, and each contributes something to the general significance of the whole.

1. Early English Stages, p. 315.

2. Williams, p. 65.

3. For a complete table listing the pageants as they parallel one another in the different extant mystery cycles, see E.K. Chambers, The Medieval Stage. London: Oxford University Press, 1954, pp. 321-323.

The variety of elements in the Chester Cycle is demonstrated in its first two pageants; yet even here we find a bending of everything toward the significance of the whole. In the first pageant, the "Fall of Lucifer," we find portrayed the love, goodness, authority and justice of God, the loyalty of good angels, and the implacable pride of Lucifer. These elements are interacting in the pageant itself, which serves to show the state of things before man's arrival on the scene -- it may be called the background for the "Creation" and its aftermath. The "Creation" is a surprisingly richly varied and significant pageant. Its action treats the relations among God, Adam, Eve, Satan, Cain, and Abel. Among other things we see the power and authority of God, the folly of pride and the weakness of disobedience in Adam and Eve, the envy and hatred of Satan, and the selfishness, smallness, and cruelty of Cain. In the midst of this diversity of elements the paternal and merciful promise by God of a Redeemer and the passing down by Eve of this tradition gives the pageant deeper meaning by linking it with the whole cycle. The first chapter of man's story closes with the selfishness and cruelty of Cain; this is in sharp contrast to the self-sacrifice and charity of Christ, Who comes at the centre of the cycle to renew all things and to save that which was lost.

In the "Deiuge" pageant we find an incident which has no Scriptural warrant. This is the scene in which Noah's wife refuses to enter the ark. After the animals have been named Noah invites her to enter, and the argument starts:

Noe

Wife, come in! why standes thou here?
thou art ever froward, that dare I sweare.
come in, on gods half! tyme yt were,
for feare lest that we drowne.

Uxor Noe

Yea, Sir, set vp your sayle
and rowe forth with evill heale!
for, without any fayle,
I will not out of this town^e

But I haue my gossips everichon,
one foote further I will not gone;
they shall not drowne, by St. John,
and I may save their lyfe.
they loved me full well, by christ;
but that wilt let them in thy chist,
els rowe forth, Noe, whether thou list,
and get thee a new wife.

Noe

Sem, sonne, loe, thy mother is wraw.
for sooth such another I do not know.

Sem

Father, I shall fett her in, I trow,
without any fayle.
Mother, my father after thee send,
and bydds the into yonder ship wend.
loke vp and se the wynde,
for we be readye to sayle.

uxor Noe

Sonne, goe again to him and say:
I will not come therein to daye.

Noe

Come in, wife, in 20 devills waye,
or els stand there without.

Ham

shall wee all fet her in?

Noe

yea, sonnes, in Christs blessinge and myne:
I would, yow hyde yow betyme,
for of this flood I am in doubte.¹

This banter continues, and finally the wife is forced to enter; who is greeted by Noah:

Noe

Welcome, wife, into this boate.

uxor Noe

And haue thou that for thy mote!
(Et day alapam vita?)

Noe

A! ha! mary, this is hote,
it is good to be still.
a! children, me thinkes my boate remeues,
our tarying here hugelie me greues.
Over the lande the water spredes,
God doe as he will.²

All this appears to be simply comic entertainment; it is this, but it is also something more. Even though we pity Noah and side with him and his sons in their efforts to get the old woman to save herself, we can understand and feel something in common with her. The reluctance of Noah's wife to leave her gossips is a symbol of the reluctance of every person to leave the old ways, when God's will so orders it. The old and well-beaten path is easier to follow than the "straight and narrow" which leads to heaven. When looked at in this way the scene appears

1. Chester Plays, p. 55.

2. Ibid., p. 58.

in its right light as a meaningful contribution to the whole cycle.

"Balaam and Balak" is important not only because it contains the commandments and prophecies but also because of the technique which it displays. There is striking contrast in the first half of the pageant. After God has given the commandments the high priest of the temple, representing the chosen people, addresses God and Moses alternately; and Moses addresses the people. Here is the passage with stage directions:

(Tunc princeps Sinagogae statuet eum in
loco et quasi pro populo loquatur ad Dominum it
Moysen)

Princeps Sinagogae

Ah! good lord, much of mighte,
thou comes with so great lighte;
we bene so afraide of this sighte,
no man dare speak ne looke.
God is so grym with us to deale,
but Moyses, master, with us thou mele;
ils we dyen many and feele,
so afrayde bene all wee

(tunc Moyses stans super montem loquatur
ad populum)

Moyses

Gods folke, drede you noughte,
to prove you with God hath this wrought,
to make you afrayd in deede and thoughte
aye for to avoyde synne.
By this sight you may now see,
that he is pereles of postye;
therfore his teachinge look done yee,
thereof that you not blyn.

Princeps Sinagogae

Ah! hi ghe lord, god almighte,
that Moyses shynes wondrous bright!

I may no way for great lighte
 now looke upon hym.
 And horned he smes in our sighte,
 with he came to the hyll, dight
 our lawe he hase I hope aright,
 for was he never so grym.

Moyses

you, gods folke of Israell,
 harkens to me that loven heale,
 God bade you shoulde doe everye deale,
 as that I shall saye.
 Seix dayes boldelye worches all,
 the seaventh Sabaoth you shall call,
 that daye for ought that may befall
 hallowed shalbe aye.

That doth not this deede deade shall be;
 in houses fire shall no man see.
 first fruytes to God offer yee,
 for so hym selfe bade.
 Gould and silver offers also,
 purple, bisse, and other moe,
 to hym that shall save you from woe
 and helpe you in your neede.¹

At this point the "expositor" enters with a word of clarification and
 and an apology for not playing the whole story onstage:

Expositor

Lordinges, this Comaundment
 was of the old Testament,
 and yet is used with good entent
 with all that good bene.
 This storye all if we shold fong,
 to playe this moneth it were to longe;
 wherfore most frutefull there amonge
 we taken, as shall be sene.²

1. Chester Plays, pp. 85-86.

2. Ibid., p. 87.

When the "expositor" has finished, Moses comes down from the mountain, and there is sharp contrast as King Balak arrives on horseback and introduces himself. He is angry at the people of Ismael:

I, Balaack, king of Moab land,
all Israell I had it in my hand;
I am sow wroth, I wold not wond
to slaye them, ech wighte.
For their God helpes them stiflye
of other landes to haue masterye,
that it is bootles witterlie
against them for to fighte.

What nation soever dose them noye,
Moyses prayes anone in hye;
therefore haue they sone the victorie,
and other men they haue the worse.
Therefore how will I wroken be,
I am bethought, as mot I the!
Balaam, I will, shall come to me
that people for to curse.¹

After the conflict between Balaam and Balak, in the latter part of the pageant we find the play-within-a-play technique. The prophecies are recited like the play in Hamlet and each is commented upon by the "expositor,"² as King Balak looks on. When the prophecies are completed Balak leaves in frustration, and the "expositor" finally brings the pageant to a close with a reference to Christ's Nativity:

Lordinges, much more matter
is in this story then you see here,
but the substance, without were,
is played you beforne.
And by these prophecies, leav you me,
three kinges, as you shall played see,

1. Chester Plays, p. 88.

2. See chapter III above, pp. 50-51.

presented at his Nativitye
Christ, when he was borne.¹

This action reminds us of the great epics. In the Greek epics the gods are drawn into the dramatic flux and comment upon the affairs of men; in Paradise Lost God the Father, God the Son, Raphael, and Satan are very much concerned with Adam and Eve; in the "Balaam and Balak" pageant of the Chester Cycle, God, Moses, an angel, the prophets, and King Balak come forth upon the stage and play their respective parts. In this presentation we find the epic breadth and depth achieved through dramatic contrast.

The tendency of medieval authors to add more and more legendary material can be seen in the Chester "Nativity" pageant. The incident of Joseph and the midwives, including the punishment of Salome, along with the "expositor's" story of the temple which fell miraculously, both go to draw out and illustrate the wonder and glory of the virgin birth. Imaginary incidents tend to enter in connection with points of belief or doctrine.

Of the many apparently superfluous episodes in the Chester Cycle, that of the ale-wife in the last part of Christ's "Descent into Hell" is very entertaining and notable. After Christ has freed the souls of Adam and all the good people of the Old Testament, four of the Chester Manuscripts include a two-page speech by a local ale-

1. Chester Plays, p. 104.

wife who is in Hell to stay. Here is some of what she says:

sometyme I was a tavernere,
a gentill gossipe and a tapstere,
of wyne and ale a trustie brewer,
which wo hath me wroughte.

of cannes I kepte no trewe mesuer,
my cuppes I sould at my pleasuer,
deceavinge many a creature,
tho my ale were naughte
and when I was a brewer longe,
with hoopes I made my ale stronge,
ashes and Erbes I blende amonge,
and marred so good maylte....

Taverners, tapsters of this cittie
shallbe promoted heare by me
for breakinge statutes of this cuntrey,
hurtinge the common welth.¹

The passage ends with the devils welcoming her as their "deare darlinge" who will dwell in "paine with oute Ende" and "endless balle." This all serves as a light comical interlude between the more serious "Descent into Hell" and the "Resurrection;" but it has a serious function too. The pageant was staged by the cooks and innkeepers, and the sins of the doomed ale-wife are also those most likely to be committed by these people. This fact along with the reference to "this cittie" brings out a sense of the immediacy of sin and of its dire consequences. The facts of Christianity are dramatically reinforced, being brought within the here and the now.

Just as there is a multiple variety of episodes in the Chester Cycle, so also is there present a variety of characters,

1. Chester Plays, pp. 329-330.

representing different states of life. Milton's Paradise Lost ranges from the cosmic struggle of powerful spirits, to the homely domestic scene of Adam and Eve having their lunch; the Chester Cycle includes all, from English rustics through scholars, bishops, emperors, kings and tyrants. The cycle fulfills the epic function of containing within its limits the whole broad river of life; every class has its place.

The shepherds are boisterous country people, close to the earth and unpolished. Their speech is far from courtly; witness the following:

Howe! Haroy! how! how!
dryve thy sheepe to the low!
thou may not heare but if I blowe,
as ever have I feale!¹

For lunch they carry bags full of wholesome food; this adds a homely and colourful touch:

here is bread this day was baken,
Onyons, Garlik, and lyckes,
butter that bought was in Blacon,
and greene cheese that will grease your cheekes.²

The shepherds' gifts to the Christ-Child, of a bell, a spoon, and a cap, are appropriate tokens of love and adoration by such simple and natural folk.

True nobility in the Chester Cycle is represented by Emperor Octavian and the Magi. All four of these characters use French, as mentioned in chapter III, and they speak a refined English suitable

1. Chester Plays, p. 134.

2. Ibid., p. 137.

to their state. The three kings demonstrate their education in their intimate familiarity with the prophets, especially Balaam. Their language is smooth and refined as they rejoice at the star which will lead them to the birthplace of the Saviour:

Primus rex

Mightie God and most of mayne
to honour thee we may be fayne
the Star, I see, is comen againe
that was out of our sighte.

Secundus rex

Thy Lordship to us thou ne layne,
that for mankinde wold suffer payne!
thou sende vs grace if thou be gaine
to come to thee to nighte.

Tertius rex

Ah! Lord, honoured be thou aye!
for now we shall know well the way.
I will follow it, in good faye,
my forward to fulfill.¹

The language of the kings contrasts with that of the shepherds. The kings come from the courtly world of ease and refinement, the world of privileged few, or the second estate.

But there are more types of characters than merely rustics and kings. Simeon and the doctors of the "Purification" are scholars; Herod is a villainous tyrant; Annas and Caiphas are powerful and heartless prelates; Joseph is a poor workingman, who must sell an ox in order to pay his taxes; finally, Mary, his wife, is a beautiful and

1. Chester Plays, p. 177.

virtuous lady. As Salter ~~S~~ays, it is in the mystery cycles that "we see life whole."¹

There is a variety of moods in the Chester Cycle. Parts of it may be called tragical, lyrical, and comical -- including parody, mockery, and farce.

There are tragic elements in the "Fall of Lucifer." A beautiful and powerful character is doomed through his own deliberate and fatal pride. In spite of the eloquent warnings of the other angels who are reminiscent of the ancient Greek choruses, Lucifer sets himself up as God and, of course, is punished. In the sorrowful lamentations of Lucifer and Lightbourne, as first and second demon, the audience's emotions are aroused, but sanity is never forfeited. Much as we pity the demons in their misery the goodness of God and their own wilfully evil choice are not forgotten. Second demon is speaking:

Then shall we never care for woe,
but lye here lyke 2 feendes blacke;
alas! that we did forfayt soe
the Lordes Love, that did us make.²

God is sad at Lucifer's fall. He loved His angels and willed them happiness, but pride is their enemy:

Ah! wicked pryde aye work thee wo!
my myrth hast thou made amisse.

1. Medieval Drama in Chester, p. 103.

2. Chester Plays, p. 18.

I may well suffer: my will is not soe
 that they shold part thus from my bliss....
 Ah! pryde, whi hast thou not burst in 2?
 Why did they that? Why did they theis?
 Behold, my Angels: pride is your foe
 all sorrow shall shew where ever it is.¹

There is pathos in this portrayal of God, Who is so very much offended and grieved that His angels have deliberately torn themselves away, rejecting His paternal love, and making themselves His impladable enemies. There is an anology here to human experience. One of the greatest tragedies in life is that of the son who returns the love of his father with hatred. The great central tragedy of the mystery cycles is the altogether different one, the Crucifixion, but it has already been pointed out.

Even though the Chester Cycle is less lyrical than that of York, it does contain certain passages of lyric beauty. Most touching of them all is, perhaps, the the salutation of the third shepherd to the Christ-Child:

Haile, prynce withoutten peere,
 that mankind shall releeve!
 hayle the, foe unto Lucifer,
 the which beguiled Eve.

hayle, graunter of happe!
 in earth now thou dwelles.
 low, sonne, I bring the a Capp,
 for I have nothing els.

this gifte I geve thie is but small;
 though I come hyndermost of all,

1. Chester Plays, p. 19.

when thou shalt me to thy blisse call,
good lord, then thinke on mee.¹

There is not here the complexity of the sonnets of Donne, nor is there the depth of the religious lyrics of Herbert. This is rather the simple expression of the genuine faith and sincere love of a poor shepherd. He knows the great purpose of Christ's coming; he offers as a gift the only thing he has; and he sneaks in the very human wish that he be remembered for his pains. As a lyric this passage is truly beautiful.

Examples of the broadly comical are easy to find interspersed throughout the cycle, but the one obvious instance of parody is the shepherds' aping of the angels' hymn of "Gloria in Excelsis," at Christ's birth. Here is a sample; the first shepherd is speaking:

Naie, on a 'glore' and a 'glare' and a 'gli'
good Gabriell when he so glored,
when he sang, I migt not be sory,
for through my breast-bone bloting he bored.²

A crude rustic is here venturing to mock nothing less than an archangel, as he parodies the familiar Christmas hymn. Salter says that for breath-taking, colossal impudence the scene is "without rival in drama."³ So much for comedy.

Before going on to chapter six and the style of the cycle, a few words of recapitulation are in order. In our study of amplitude in the Chester Cycle we saw first the variety of elements and episodes

1. Chester Plays, p. 156.

2. Ibid., p. 149.

3. Medieval Drama in Chester, p. 104.

it contains, then we pointed out some of the various classes and types of people it contains. Finally, we spoke of the multiplicity of moods in the cycle, referring specifically to the tragical, the lyrical, and the comical. This ~~chapter~~ has shown how the Chester Cycle has the epic quality of amplitude.

CHAPTER VI

STYLE

A fourth quality of epic listed in chapter I was that of "high seriousness," the use of words in a very distinguished way. An epic must be joyful yet dignified, or, to use C.S. Lewis' term, it must be "solempne."¹ Our task is to see if the Chester Mystery Cycle has the quality of language suited to its needs. A number of questions may be asked in this regard: Is the style elevated? Is it flexible? What are its excellences? Finally, does the cycle have a seriousness or dignity of tone; is it solempne?

Before entering into our examination of the style of the Chester Mystery Cycle, we might recall a couple of facts. First, the English mystery cycles were not meant to be read. Not only is their verse meant to be recited, but recited on a stage, in dramatic circumstances by suitably costumed actors, along with music, singing, and with the aid of stage machinery -- all in a festive atmosphere before huge and lively crowds:

When the mysteries are seen with an alert eye,
it is clear that the religious drama on the
stage was something quite different from what
it appears on the page.²

There are in the mysteries the long revealing speeches found in epic,

1. A Preface to Paradise Lost, p. 17. See above chapter I, pp. 16-17.

2. Prosser, p. 44.

but there is little of the elaborate descriptive passages found in a poem like Paradise Lost. The reason for this scarcity of description is that the spectacle is meant to unfold before the audience. For instance, Annas and Caiaphas were not elaborately described as bishops; they simply wore the costumes of bishops.

A second fact about the Chester Mystery Cycle is that the medieval audience valued it for its story and content rather than for the pithiness of its verse. In the cycle there is very little of the "poetical gems" one finds in Shakespeare or Donne. The medieval audience did look for meaning or sentencia, but that meaning was to be found not in short gnomic verse but in the general narrative. The verse flows on using stock phrases, such as "with god intent," "I wis" and "all by dene," for the sake of smooth rhyming; this is the oral "formulaic" technique.

Though the dramatic presentation of the Chester Cycle gave a more solemn and stately impression than it is possible to get in the mere reading, its verse has certain poetical qualities which make it a suitable vehicle for the moods and ideas it is meant to convey.

The cycle opens with a stately speech in which God declares His might and majesty and His reason for creation:

Ego sum Alpha et O,
 primus et nobilissimus;
 It is my Will, yt sholde be soe
 yt is, it was, yt shall be thus:

I am greate god gracious which never had beginninge.
 The wholle foode of parente is set in my essencion;
 I am the tryall of the trynitie that neuer whall be twynninge;
 Peareles Patron Imperiall and Patris Sapentia.
 By beames be all beatytude; all blisse is in my buyldinge;
 All myrthe is in my Mansuetude Cum Dei Potentia.
 Bothe Visible and eke Invisible, all is my weldinge;
 as god greatest and glorious, all lyeth in mea licentia.

For all the mighte of the maiestye is magnified in me,
 Prince principall proved in my perpetuall prudens.
 I was never but one and ever one in three,
 set in substantiall sothenes within Caelestiall sapience.
 These three tryalls in a Trone and True Trynitie
 Be grounded in my godhead, exalted by my excellence;
 the mighte of my making is marked all in me,
 dissolved under a Dyademe by my divyne experyence.

Now sithe I am thus solemne and set in my solation,
 a biglie blisse here will I builde, a heaven without ending,
 and cast a Comlye compasse by my comely creation:
 neene orders of Angells be ever to one Attending.
 Doe your endeavour and doubte ye not under my domynacion
 to sitt in Celestyall safetie, all solace to your sending,
 for all the lyking in this Lordshipp be loue to my lawdation;
 throughe the might of my most Maiestye your mirth shall ever be
 mending.¹

The first verses in Latin set the tone for the remainder of the speech. Notice the use of Latin phrases throughout: "Patris Sapentia," "Cum Dei Potentia" and "mea licentia." There are also learned English words and phrases such as "essencion," "Peareles Patron Imperiall," "perpetuall prudens," "Caelestiall sapience," "domynacion," and "lawdation." These interspersed through the long stately march of alliterative verse give the impression of great knowledge, dignity and majesty. This is fitting language to be used by the Infinite Creator as He sets the universe, and the great cycle, in motion.

1. Chester Plays, pp. 9-10.

Later in the "Fall of Lucifer," when he asserts his impudent pride, the orders of angels warn Lucifer in alternate-rhyming quatrains. Here is a sample:

Virtutes

We will not assent unto your pryde,
ne in our hartes take such a thought,
but that our Lord shall be our guyde
and kepe to us that he hath wrought.

Cherubyn

Our Lord comanded all that be here
to kepe his hestes, both more and lesse;
therfore I warne the, Lucifere,
this pride will turne to great distresse.

Lucifere

Distresse! I commaunde yow for to cease
and se the bewtye that I beare;
all heaven shynes throughe my brightnes,
for god him selfe shynes not so cleare.¹

Note the smoothness and beauty of verse in orderly and rapid stanzas suited to the utterance of each of the orders of heavenly hosts.

A similar smoothness is in the verses spoken by Lucifer and Lightbourne, after their fall, as first and second demon:

Primus Demon

Alas! that ever we were wrought!
that we shold come into this place!
we were in Ioy, now we be nought,
alas! we have forfeited our Grace.

Secundus Demon

And even hither thou hast us brought,
into a dungeon to take our trace.

1. Chester Plays, p. 14.

all this sorrow thou hast vs sought,
the Devill may speede thy stinking face!

Primus Demon

My face, false fayture, for thy fare!
thou hast us brought to teene and tray.
I comber, I canker, I kindle in care,
I sinke in sorrow; what shall I saye?

Secundus Demon

Thou hast us brought this wicked way,
thorough thy might all and thy pryde,
Out of blisse that lasteth aye,
In sorrow evermore for to abyde.

Primus Demon

Thy wytte it was as well as myne,
of that pride that we did showe,
and now lyethe here in hell pyne,
till the day of Dome that beames shall blowe.

Secundus Demon

Then shall we never care for woe,
but lye here lyke 2 feendes blacke;
alas! that we did Borfayt soe
the Lordes Love, that did us make.¹

The sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts; and so it appears in this exchange of dialogue by the demons. Through their own wicked pride they have lost perfect love and happiness and have been plunged into deepest suffering and despair; yet even in their ugliness and hatred they utter language which is superbly polished and expressive not only of their own misery but also of the spaciousness of the cycle --

"till the day of Dome that beames shall blowe"

1. Chester Plays, pp. 17-18.

--and also of the infinite goodness and love of the God they have so wilfully rejected.

Most of the remainder of the Chester Cycle is composed in eight-line stanzas rhyming either aabccb or aabccd. This form is surprisingly flexible, being capable of serving many different functions, from the expression of short lyrical passages, to that of long ranting speeches. Often, as in the "Sacrifice of Isaac," the stanzas are divided up and apportioned, one or two lines to a speaker.

An example of beautiful poetic imagery is in the last half of the "Deluge" pageant. God promises not to punish the world by water in the future:

Where cloudes in the welkin bene,
that ilke bowe shall be sene
In tokeninge that my wrath and tene
shall never this wroken be.
The stringe is turned toward you
and toward me is bent the bowe
that such wedder shall never showe,
and this behett I thee.¹

This is a fitting passage to be inserted in the longer speech which is calculated to inspire love and trust. The pageant ends with these words:

for vengeance whall no more appeare;
and now farewell, my darling deere.²

An epic has plenty of long speeches, and the Chester Cycle

1. Chester Plays, p. 62.

2. Ibid., p. 63.

has its share. There are majestic speeches by God, like the one quoted above from the ~~start~~ of the cycle; there are defiant and malevolent speeches by Satan; and there are ranting speeches by Herod. Here is Herod's reaction to the news, brought by the Magi, that a new King has been born. He is lord of the earth, and they had better mind what news they bring, for no child dare challenge the might of such a great king as he:

sirs, aduise you what you sayne:
 suche tidinges makes my hart vnfayne.
 I red you, take those wordes againe
 for feare of vyllanie.
 There is none so great that me dare gaine,
 to take my Realme and to Attayne
 my power but he shall haue payne
 and be ponished apertlye.

I kinge of kinges, none so keene,
 I soveraigne Syre, as well is seene,
 I Tyrant, that may both take and teene
 Castle, tower, and towne,
 I wilde this world withouten wene,
 I beat all those vnbuxom beene,
 I dryue the Devills all by deene
 deepe in hell a-downe.

For I am king of all mankinde,
 I byd, I beat, I loose, I bynde,
 I maister the Moone; take this in mynde
 that I am most of mighte.

I am the greatest aboue degree,
 that is or was or euer shall be.
 the Sonne it dare not shyne on me
 if I byd hym goe downe;
 No rayne to fall shall none be free,
 nor no Lord haue that Liberty
 that dare abide, and I bid flee,
 but I shall cracke his Crowne;

Nor far nor neere that doth me noye;
 who wrathes me I shall destroy;
 for euery freake I dare defie
 that nill me pay ne plaise.

But you be bayne I shall you beate;
there is no man for you shall treate;
all for wrath see how I sweate.
my hart is not at ease.

For all men may witte and see, (Baculum)
both he and you all three,
that I am king of Galaly,
whatsoever he saith or dose,
what the deuill shold this be! (Gladius)
a boy, a groome of Low degree
shold raigne aboue my Roialtie
and make me but a goose! (Iace Gladium)

That ringes and raignes so rayallye,
all grace and goodnes I have to geue,
there is no prince but he shall plye
to doe my hartes ease. (Baculum et toga alia)
But now You may both heare and see
that reconed I have vp my royalty,
I red you all beruled by me,
and found me for to please.¹

There is an unmistakable air of self-deception in this speech. Herod is a villainous tyrant, and this dramatic point is furnished by him with great gusto in the language he uses. He tries to shore up his own hollowness and weakness by boasting, but in him is to be found neither the goodness, ^{by} wisdom, nor the courage and charity that a great king must have. We may imagine the three wise kings looking in amazement at this braggart.

The flexibility of the Chester stanza has been mentioned. Contrast is a valuable, almost necessary quality of drama and epic -- flexibility of style allows much contrast to be used. The Chester stanza, having been used in the long ranting speeches of Herod, is used

1. Chester Plays, pp. 166-168.

in an altogether different manner by Christ Himself at the healing of the blind man. Christ is speaking of His mission in this world:

While the day is fayre and bright,
my fathers workes I must worke right,
until the coming of the night,
that light be gone away.
In this world, when I am here,
I am the light that shyneth clear;
my light to them shall well appear
which cleave to me alway.¹

This stanza, with its supply of simple one-syllable words, is crystal clear, and it conveys the impression of Christ as the Bringer of truth into the world. In the "Last Judgement" the Chester stanza is put to still another use in the lamentations of the damned. A queen is speaking:

fye on Pearles! fye on pryde!
fye on gowne! fye on guyde!
fye on hewe! fye on hyde!
these harrowen me to hell.
Against this chaunce I may not chyde.
this bitter Bale I must abyde;
yea, woe and teene I suffer this tyde,
no lyvinge tonge may tell.²

Here the juxtaposition of parallel phrases drives home the folly and evil of idle riches and vanity. This is emphasized even more in the final lines which describe the consequences of vice as indescribably bitter.

Probably the most glorious speech in the Chester Cycle is the one given by Christ at His Resurrection. There is intense beauty and pathos in this declaration by Christ of His great love for men:

1. Chester Plays, pp. 166-168.

2. Ibid., p. 232.

Earthly man, that I haue wrought,
 awake out of thy sleepe!
 Earthly man, whom I haue bought,
 of me thou take no keepe.
 from heauen mans sowl I sought
 into a dongeon deepe;
 my deere Lemmon from thence I brought,
 for routhe of her I weep.

I am very prince of peace and kinge of free mercy;
 who will of sinnes haue releace,
 on me the call and cry.
 And if they will of synnes cease,
 I graunt them peace truly,
 and therto a full riche messe
 in Bread, my own body.

I am very bread of lyfe,
 from heauen I light and am send.
 who eateth this Bread, man or wyfe,
 shall lyue with me, without ende.
 And that Bread that I you geue,
 your wicked lyfe to amend,
 becomes my flesh through your beleife,
 and doth release your sinfull band.

And who so ever eateth that Bread
 in synne or wicked lyfe,
 he receiveth his owne death,
 I warne both man and wyfe .
 The which bread shall be seene insteade,
 ther ioy is aye full ryfe,
 when he is dead through fooles redd,
 then is he brought to payne and stryf.¹

The alternate-rhyming eight-line stanzas are similar in form to the speech of the angels in the "Fall of Lucifer." It is a suitable form for the paeon of victory and love by the Hero after His frightening ordeal, which has been undergone for the sake of mankind to whom He speaks.

1. Chester Plays, pp. 337-338.

The Chester Mystery Cycle is joyful and humorous; yet it is stately and dignified. Over-familiarity with the humorous sections removed from their context can lead us to regard the mystery cycles as mere buffonery. Parts of the "Deluge" and the "Adoration of Shepherds" are comical, and there may even be a touch of comedy in the lively devil who comes for Herod toward the end of the "Slaying of the Innocents." But these scenes must be seen in the right perspective as a small part of the great mystery cycle whose theme of salvation is anything but comical. The Chester Cycle has the pervasive tone or quality spoken of by C.S. Lewis:

This quality will be understood by any one who really understands the meaning of the Middle English work solempne. This means something different, but not quite different, from modern English solemn. Like solemn it implies the opposite of what is familiar, free and easy, or ordinary. But unlike solemn it does not suggest gloom, oppression, or austerity.... A great mass by Mozart or Beethoven is as much a solemnity in its hilarious gloria as in its poignant crucifixus est.... The solempne is the festal which is also the stately and the ceremonial, the proper occasion for pomp.¹

The great mystery cycles were played on festive occasions in an atmosphere of celebration, but they, like the Church liturgy from which they derived, are ritualistic. They have the pomp spoken of by Lewis. The humorous is admitted, but there is a sense of propriety, of what is fitting. The Chester Mystery Cycle, like every epic, is solempne.

1. Lewis, op. cit., p. 17.

CONCLUSION

We are now at a point from which we may look around as with an estimating view of the result of our explorations. We find that chasing the notion of the epic through the ins and outs of the Chester plays we have found its strong traces in the theme of the cycle, in the choric notes of the cycle, in the habits of forecasting statement and restatement of the theme in the tragic elements common to the great epics, and even within the rather homely-sounding line of the Chester play we have traced the epic style and tone.

The theme of salvation, the common theme of all the cycles, holds the pageants together in its strong tight texture, right from the fall of Satan "the cause of all our woe" to the Resurrection of Christ, Who "bought us" back into salvation, and His final great scene of Judgement when He deals out the rewards and punishments almost necessarily foredeemed throughout the cycle.

The choric nature of the medieval cycle is the one thing that is fairly common knowledge; in fact this may be too well known as the occasional comic fling catches the imagination of the surveying reader and leads him into the glib error of supposing that the cycle is a long exuding worm of secularized gamboling. We find that as a kind of photostatic probing of the medieval spirit these plays are rivalled in their depth and sincerity by Piers Plowman alone.

We find also what has been at some time in the past sloughed off as primitive fun or monkish didacticism does, on the contrary,

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partake of several various types of epic amplitude.

The occasion of the performance of the Chester Cycle, whether it be Corpus Christi or Whitsuntide, would suggest and demand a style commensurate with the "solemnity" of these great liturgical feasts. Examination of the cycle, keeping in mind the auxiliary arts of music and stagecraft, discovers this quality to be present to such an extent that it does lend the overall tone of reverential celebration of story of how Christ bought us all from sin.

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ABSTRACT

This is an examination of MS Harley 2124 edited by Dr. Hermann Diemling to discover, in the words of Tillyard, whether this cycle might not be considered a medieval epic.

Commonly accepted by all is the proposition that epic has a great theme. Since the complete exploration of the nature of epic would be beyond the scope of a short chapter such as I, we have accepted as a working proposition Tillyard's delineation of the epic spirit in his great work, The English Epic and its Background. The qualities, therefore, which we trace are those especially singled out by Tillyard: 1, control, 2, choric quality, 3, amplitude, and 4, high seriousness or solemnity of style.

Chapter II studies the great salvation theme of all the mystery cycles, with particular emphasis on it and its tragic nature in the Chester Cycle.

Chapter III is a study of how the Chester Cycle is well-unified from beginning to end around the central theme of salvation. The action of the complete cycle is excellently controlled by means of prophecy, commandment and vision, so as to give one unified impression.

In chapter IV the cycle is examined, first, to see if it reflects the predominantly Christian spirit of the Middle Ages, and second, to see if it is in close contact with the real life of people

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in fourteenth century England.

The varieties of episodes, of classes of people, and of moods in the Chester Cycle are studied in chapter V to show that the cycle has the epic quality of amplitude.

Finally, in chapter VI, the poetic excellences, and most especially the pervasive tone of solemnity in the Chester Cycle, are pointed out, and it is concluded that the cycle has the high seriousness of solemnity of style necessary for a great epic.