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**Author**

Walter, Melissa

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**PERFORMANCE POSSIBILITIES FOR THE CHESTER  
EXPOSITOR, 1532–1575**

by Melissa Walter

Modern scholarship suggests that Expositor most likely appeared in the Chester cycle in 1530 or later, when print was becoming an important means of communication and understanding in England. Many writers have noted Expositor's unusual position between actors and audience. I explore here several performance options which would highlight Expositor's mediating function in the drama. I also argue that Expositor's function and significance in the cycle shifted between the time of the 1531–1532 performance, when the Reformation had not yet taken hold in England but the influence of print media had begun to be felt, to 1575, when the play was last performed in the face of opposition by the Privy Council. During this period of almost half a century, the Chester cycle became an experience which encompassed the whole town, where the play sphere and the audience sphere were relatively unified and where the creation of the world, Christ's passion and resurrection, and the Last Judgment were recreated in fifteenth- or sixteenth-century Chester. It also became a theatrical representation which Expositor describes as a "signification of [a] deed of devotion,"<sup>1</sup> but not the devotion itself. The struggle between these two types of experience is inscribed in the play text itself, particularly in the role of Expositor. Lawrence Clopper suggests that the Corpus Christi Play known before the sixteenth century may have been performed in one location—in other words, that before the sixteenth century the Corpus Christi procession and the play were separate, if related, events. If this is the case, as is likely, the performing of the play all over the town is a specifically sixteenth-century phenomenon, perhaps seeking in part to argue for or demonstrate town unity and religious wholeness, but always showing the cracks and conflicts within that unity.

I am grateful to John Coldewey for his direction, insight, and encouragement with this essay, and to the members of the sixteenth-century session of the Medieval and Early Modern Students of the Pacific conference in October 1998 for their feedback on an earlier draft. Errors or misjudgments are, of course, my own.

<sup>1</sup>*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. David Mills (East Lansing, MI 1992) 81.

Expositor is one of a series of mediating characters in mystery cycles. These mediating characters such as Preco, Doctor, Nuntius, the Messenger, and Expositor can reveal changes in the way that people sought to contact the divine, and, therefore, in the way that they conceived of the experience of understanding. In other words,

Does access to God necessitate concrete experience or abstraction, visual image or written word, public participation or quiet consumption? Does the experience itself lead to God, or must we mount hierarchical steps? Can we use our imaginations, or must we be carefully led by unshakable truths and authorities? Or, as is probably the case, if successful spiritual experience and contact with the divine necessitate some combination of all of these, what is the nature of this combination?<sup>2</sup>

Unlike earlier scholars such as E. K. Chambers,<sup>3</sup> most modern scholars distinguish between Expositor-type characters and other mediating figures. With David Mills<sup>4</sup> and Martin Stevens,<sup>5</sup> Heather Hill Vasquez argues persuasively that in contrast to mediating characters who invite the audience to enter into the world of the play, to see the play-sphere and the audience sphere as essentially unified, Expositor seeks to separate them. Whereas early scholarship on the Chester cycle tended to see Expositor's direct address and "expository" stance as evidence for the play's age, modern scholars posit Expositor as functioning to effect a separation between the play and the audience, and therefore to maintain

<sup>2</sup>Heather Hill Vasquez, "The Possibilities of Performance: Mediatory Styles in Middle English Religious Drama" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington 1997) 5.

<sup>3</sup>E. K. Chambers writes, "The influence of the old play is clearest in those scenes in which an Expositor, also called Preco, Doctor, Nuntius, or Messenger, comments to the 'Lordinges' of the audience on the significance of the topics represented. He calls himself Gobet on the Grene, and his demands for 'room' to be made, with the fact that both he and later the character Antichristus come in riding, suggest a stationary performance on a green or other open space, rather than one on moving pageants." Chambers, *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages* (Oxford 1947) 26.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Mills writes, "The structuring impulse is at a remove from the surface subject and the events require informed interpretation before they can be rightly understood. That need for directed interpretation denies Chester the openness of other medieval plays. The text is typically accompanied by commentary from an authority figure and the audience is not free to choose its own reading of the action. It also has a distancing effect, drawing us back from the historical action to the contemporary world which we share with the Expositor." David Mills, *Recycling the Cycle: The City of Chester and Its Whitsun Plays* (Toronto 1998) 163.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Stevens, "The Chester Cycle" in *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A Casebook*, ed. Kevin Harty (New York 1993) 36-47.

control over the meaning of the play. For example, in his first appearance in play 4, Expositor arrives on horseback and declares,

Lordings, what this may signyfe  
I will expound it apertly  
that the unlearned standinge herebye  
maye knowe what this may bee.<sup>6</sup>

By saying that he will explain, by asserting that there is something to “knowe,” and by referring to “the unlearned standinge herebye,” “Expositor immediately . . . inserts an interpretive stance, declaring that a meaning must be made of what has been viewed”<sup>7</sup> and claiming the authority to make this meaning himself. Expositor also separates the play and the audience by referring to the players as “they” and by making a distinction between “now,” sixteenth-century England, and the historical time of the plays, as Vasquez points out.<sup>8</sup> Even when Expositor prays in front of the audience at the end of play 4, he speaks of Abraham in the past tense. Rather than experiencing the near-sacrifice of Isaac as a present event, the audience is directed to think of it in more removed terms, as a story from which a moral can be drawn:

Such obedience grant us, O Lord,  
ever to thy most holy word,  
that in the same we may accord  
as this Abraham was bain.<sup>9</sup>

With the addition of Expositor to the play, simply participating in the recreation of this biblical event is not enough. Its meaning must be explained and thereby controlled. Vasquez argues further that maintaining control over the meaning of the play became necessary when meaning itself was no longer defined by participation in an experience, but became instead the discursive and relatively fixed entity made possible by literacy.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Mills (n. 1 above) 69–70, quoted in Vasquez (n. 2 above) 28.

<sup>7</sup>Vasquez (n. 2 above) 28.

<sup>8</sup>Vasquez (n. 2 above) 49.

<sup>9</sup>Mills (n. 1 above) 81.

<sup>10</sup>In accepting this distinction between participatory religious experience on the one hand and religious experience based on correct understanding of doctrine and stories on the other, I do not intend to suggest that those participating in the earlier versions of the cycle play lacked interiority or that they were not subjects. David Aers’s essay, “A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists” in *Culture and History 1350–1600: Essays on*

It seems likely that Expositor was added to the cycle when the performance was moved from Corpus Christi to a Whitsun performance. His introduction thus occurred just before Henry VIII's 1534 declaration of the Act of Supremacy and during the early spread of literacy-based conceptions of what it means to understand something and of how knowledge is transmitted.<sup>11</sup> During this period, the plays were expanded to their three day schedule and staged processionally, or stop-to-stop, as some recent scholars prefer to name the method.<sup>12</sup> Because

*English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (New York 1992), argues convincingly against such a proposition. Instead I am suggesting that the ways in which this interiority was engaged by the drama changed over time.

<sup>11</sup>Most critics agree that by 1531 the plays had moved from Corpus Christi day to Whitsun, perhaps to avoid competing for an audience with the successful Coventry cycle, or because the play had been lengthened from a Passion play to a complete history of the world and could no longer share the day with the feast of Corpus Christi (Mervyn James, "Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town" in *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* [Cambridge 1986] 16, and others) or because Corpus Christi was already a threatened feast, or to increase civic control of the cycle (Lawrence Clopper, "Lay and Clerical Impact on Civic Religious Drama and Ceremony" in *Contexts for Early English Drama*, ed. Marianne G. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey (Bloomington 1989). The plays were thus still on a feast day, but no longer on the deeply resonant day of Corpus Christi. Peter Travis writes that "If Expositor is likely to have been the creation of only one playwright, or if he is the kind of paradramatic didactic figure which—as Chambers and Salter assume—would have been created at only one time in the cycle's history, it must follow that the five pageants [in which Expositor appears] were devised or revised around the time of the Whitsun shift" (Peter Travis, *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle* [Chicago 1982] 48). Travis also believes that Expositor was added to the cycle in conjunction with the addition of episodes based on *The Stanzaic Life of Christ*. Martin Stevens agrees that, "The Travis thesis, which derives in part from an article published by Robert Wilson in 1931, is persuasive" (Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles* [Princeton 1988] 261). In *The Middle English Mystery Play: A Study in Dramatic Speech and Form* (Cambridge 1992), Hans Jürgen Diller concurs that Expositor was a late addition to the plays.

<sup>12</sup>The use of the term "stop-to-stop" by Alan Nelson and Ruth Brant Davis, among others, emphasizes that the plays were performed at fixed locations along a processional route. That is, the plays were not performed while the wagons were in motion, and the performance did not consist merely of a parade of moving wagons featuring plays, dumbshows or tableaux vivants. Other scholars, such as Lawrence Clopper, continue to use the broader term "processional." Some scholars have argued that the Chester cycle was never staged processionally at all (Leonard Powlick, "The Staging of the Chester Cycle: An Alternate Theory" in Harty [n. 5 above] 199–230) or that they were staged processionally on days one and two, but performed on a stationary stage on day three (Harry N. Langdon, "Staging of the Ascension in the Chester Cycle," *Theatre Notebook* 26 [1971–1972] 53–60), while others have debated the date at which the cycle adopted the three-day processional pattern. Most scholars continue to be convinced by the processional staging model, however, and Lawrence Clopper agrees that the plays were expanded into a three day, processional performance including much more Old Testa-

of Expositor's tendency to separate the play sphere and the audience sphere, it is worth considering possibilities for performance that would highlight this mediating role. One such possibility is that a single individual played Expositor. Whether or not a single Expositor would be logistically possible depends on the details of the performance text and of how the processional staging of the Chester cycle worked. One obstacle to positively proving that a single Expositor would have been possible is that we do not have a definitive performance text of the cycle. Indeed, David Mills convincingly argues that the performance "text was subject to constant circumstantial modification and modernization" so that the cycle was "in a constant state of flux—effectively, an incomplete work that never perfects itself."<sup>13</sup> The extant manuscripts, in contrast, were never performance texts. Thus any counting up of lines and calculating of performance times will yield only tentative results. A second obstacle is the lack of a definitive scholarly consensus about the logistics of processional performance. Nevertheless, there are some conditions under which the single Expositor method would work. Since Expositor appears in plays 4, 5, 6, 12, and 22, only day one (plays 1–9 in the performance pattern of the H manuscript, plays 1–5 in the performance pattern of the Group manuscripts, of which Hm is one) would present challenges to the single Expositor theory. Using the text appearing in David Mills's 1992 edition, based primarily on the Hm manuscript, the single Expositor method would work if the plays at each station began together, played until all were finished, and then all moved at once to the next station. Assuming that the plays were performed at the rate of 750 lines per minute and allowing for five minutes after the longest plays to move to the next station, the maximum total time necessary for the plays on day one, using synchronized staging, is 775 minutes, or about thirteen hours.<sup>14</sup> This length, while impractical for a modern stage show, could

ment material in conjunction with their move to Whitsunday, between 1521 and 1532 (Clopper [n. 11 above] 103; "History of the Chester cycle," *Modern Philology* [Feb. 1978] 221).

<sup>13</sup>David Mills, "The Editing of the Play Manuscripts" in Harty (n. 5 above) 6. Mills continues, "A cycle, as I see it, is a street of plays, each with its own history, each constantly being modified by its occupants. Here or there one is demolished or replaced by a new structure, partly but not wholly constrained by the surrounding structures" (11).

<sup>14</sup>Ruth Brant Davis uses a conversion rate of 870 lines per hour, but John Leyerle told the participants in a 1968 MLA seminar on the staging of the cycle plays that the To-

have been acceptable for the community-involving event that the processional dramas embodied.

Expositor appears in two of the plays on the first day in the Hm manuscript version. The timing of his appearance, without taking into consideration extended action developed without words, is shown in the table below:

<b>Play</b>	<b>Total # of lines in the play</b>	<b>Total # of minutes in the play</b>	<b>Lines where Expositor appears</b>	<b>Minutes where Expositor appears</b>
Play 4 Abraham, Lot, Melchysedeck	493	39	113–144 193–208 461–484	9 to 11 15 to 17 37 to 39
Play 5 Moses and the Law	415	33	41–64 348–415	3 to 5 28 to 33

Expositor never appears at the same line number in plays 4 and 5. Therefore, it might just be possible for a single individual to have functioned as Expositor in both plays when they were being performed simultaneously with synchronized start times.

Theatrical events like the talking ass in play 5 complicate the above scheme. If the talking ass delayed the end of play 5, Expositor could have trouble making his way back to play 4 for the final explanation of the scene between Abraham and Isaac. But the action where Abraham binds his son upon the altar could also take some time. In fact, play 4 contains three separate binding scenes: first Abraham binds Isaac's hands and feet, and Isaac asks why; then Abraham puts a blindfold on Isaac, and discussion follows; finally, Abraham binds Isaac on the altar. All of these events together might take equivalent time to the talking ass.<sup>15</sup>

ronto players "have found 750–800 lines about the best that could be done" ("Informal Minutes of Conference 53," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 12 [1969] 88). I have chosen the conservative conversation rate of 750 lines per hour.

<sup>15</sup>In the staging pattern of the H manuscript, plays 4, 5, and 6 happen on the same day. The play 5 of the H manuscript differs significantly from the play 5 of the Group manuscripts in that it includes prophecies from a series of prophets, rather than just sticking with Balaam, and it features an expanded role for Expositor. See David Mills's

The above scheme requires that the plays with Expositor in them start at the same time whenever they are played concurrently, and it requires that Expositor be able to move through the streets relatively quickly. In Alan Nelson's discussion of "synchronized staging," the staging method he posits whereby "all plays performed at any given acting time begin simultaneously"<sup>16</sup> Nelson suggests that couriers could have observed when all the plays were finished and then run and told the plays to advance to the next station. And Rogers's breviary states, "for worde beinge broughte how euery place was neere doone the came."<sup>17</sup> This line seems to support the use of couriers. Since the timing necessary for the single Expositor theory would benefit from even more precision, I would suggest that the timing could be accomplished by ringing a loud bell, sending up a flare, or by keeping hourglasses. The couriers could then warn the players that it was time to move on, and the bell or flare signal could be given when it was time to start. In an atmosphere of festivity, keeping accurate time with hourglasses seems possible only when we imagine the atmosphere as a kind of serious play, where attention to detail, far from being ignored, might even be heightened.

One advantage of the single Expositor theory is that it provides a possible practical explanation for the stage direction that says that Expositor enters on horseback.<sup>18</sup> Another advantage is that Expositor's running between plays could explain why he doesn't consistently appear at the beginning and the end of the plays, guarding the transitional periods between plays. These moments are particularly liminal or liminoid in Victor Turner's sense: they are sites where meaning is not

thorough discussion of the differences between the plays and how they affect the role of Expositor, "Two Versions of Chester Play V" in Harty (n. 5 above) 119–125. One important difference is that Expositor speaks after each prophet, restating what that prophet has said. Thus, he functions more to distance the audience from the prophets, to make it clear that the prophets are not prophesying to the sixteenth-century Chester audience, than to explain concepts or event that the other characters have not revealed. I have not succeeded in devising a schedule for the single Expositor using the H manuscript. Nevertheless, several Expositors who were separate from guild wagons would also be an effective distancing device.

<sup>16</sup>"Informal Minutes" (n. 14 above) 87.

<sup>17</sup>Lawrence Clopper, *Chester*, Records of Early English Drama (Toronto 1979) 239.

<sup>18</sup>See n. 3 above for E. K. Chambers's suggestion that the fact that Expositor and Antichrist enter on horses hints at a stationary performance. Other scholars have seen the use of horses as a sign of *processional* performance, however.



strictly defined, where the audience could take control as participants.<sup>19</sup> For example, between plays 4 and 5, Expositor does not appear, and the transitional space could easily become one of festival anticipation of the talking ass rather than serious contemplation or interpretive distance.

A problem with this staging method is that after the shorter plays, the audience would have to wait for the longer plays to finish before the procession could move forward. As Ruth Brant Davis points out, David Rogers's breviary insists that the players

came from one streete to an other keapeinge a direct order in euery streete, for before the first cariage was gone the seconde came, and so the thirde, and so orderly till the laste was donne all in order without any stayeing in any place, for worde being broughte how euery place was neere done they came and made no place to tarye till the last was played.<sup>20</sup>

Although David Rogers is unlikely ever to have witnessed a performance, the breviary claims to be a compilation of the notes of David

<sup>19</sup>In *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York 1982), Turner distinguishes between liminal and liminoid. Where liminal activities are the antistructural work/play of a stable, preindustrial society which are consistently reabsorbed into the firm structures of that society, liminoid activity is characteristic of industrial societies in which leisure is a meaningful concept and antistructural activity is more likely, in his view, to unleash change. In societies where the work/leisure division is not that of the factory, "play is in earnest, and has to be within bounds" (32). Turner sees "the 'liminoid' as an independent and critical source . . . the liminoid can be an independent domain of creative activity in the 'centers' or 'mainstreams' of 'productive social labor'" (33). He includes the thinking of Marx along with popular leisure activities in his list of liminoid phenomena. Turner's assumption is that, since industrial societies are dynamic, the inventive, critical power generated in a liminal/liminoid mode can create major social change, rather than being reabsorbed into the firm structures of the traditional society. Chester's mystery cycle seems to be dancing on this edge. Is it a festival that adjusts and expresses social tensions and reinforces existing values, or does it have dangerous power to teach, transform, and/or corrupt? Moreover, if it reinforces existing values, are these the seeds of Protestantism nurtured by the rebel monk Ranulf Higden, or the Popish superstitions of a dark age? The struggle over whether or not to perform the cycle in the second half of the sixteenth century suggests some disagreement about these questions among sixteenth-century religious and civic leaders. For a mayor or a cleric who saw the cycle in the terms that Turner would characterize as post-industrial, it would be more threatening, as it would carry more critical, dynamic power. Turner's theory may be somewhat contradicted, however, by the fact that the Chester cycle was established and demolished before the industrial revolution. The processional staging phase coincided instead with the rise of print and the pressure on individual spiritual choice caused by Protestant influences.

<sup>20</sup>Harley MS 1944, quoted in Davis, "The Scheduling of the Chester Cycle Plays" in Harty (n. 5 above) 234.

Rogers's father, Archdeacon Robert Rogers, who is likely to have witnessed the later performances of the play. Therefore, most scholars accept this description, which tends to contradict the synchronized staging method. Still, Stanley Kahl's suggestion that, while the wagons were waiting for others to finish, a dumbshow or a tableau vivant could have been mounted on the stage<sup>21</sup> might provide a solution to the waiting problem. Perhaps if audience members were entertained with dumbshow, they would not feel themselves to be waiting.

Another tempting explanation of the "no waiting" requirement is provided, however, by Ruth Brant Davis's model<sup>22</sup> for scheduling, in which the start times of the individual plays are not synchronized. Rather, each play follows directly after the play before it. As she points out, when the first play is the longest, this method results in a smooth performance, without gaps between the plays from the audience's perspective. Although play 1 of the Chester cycle is shorter than play 2, Davis suggests that this problem could easily be solved by having play 1 wait until play 2 is almost finished before proceeding to the next station. If, as Davis argues, play 2 is the longest play of the day, the performance would proceed smoothly after that time.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> "Informal Minutes," (n. 14 above) 89–90.

<sup>22</sup> Very similar versions of Davis's paper on "Scheduling the Cycle Plays" were published in *Theatre Notebook* 27 (1972–1973) 49–67 and in Harty (n. 5 above).

<sup>23</sup> The length of play 6 challenges Davis's model for those performances in which plays 1 through 9 were played on the first day, as seen in the H manuscript. Although in Mills's 1992 edition of the cycle, play 6 is only 702 lines, compared to the 704 lines of play 2, play 6 contains three songs as well as the dramatic events of Mary and Joseph traveling to the stable, Jesus's birth, and the midwife's hand withering and being made whole again. While play 2 contains the dramatic events of the Creation and the eating of the fruit, most of the time necessary for these events is accounted for in the lines where God describes the Creation. The extra time needed to act out these events is not likely to offset the time necessary for the singing and events in play 6. In addition, although play 2 contains music, this music appears to be background, atmospheric music over which God speaks rather than a performance event of its own which would take up extra time. Further, in Lumiansky and Mills's 1974 scholarly edition of the cycle, play 6 is 722 lines. In other words, the texts we have can support the argument that play 6 took longer to perform than play 2. This long play near the middle of the sequence would create wait time for audiences at stations 2, 3, 4, and 5 after plays 6, 7, and 8. Thus Davis's model may not completely solve the wait-time problem for performances of day one that include plays 1 through 9, as in the H manuscript. The length of play 6 supports her theory for the five-play day one, however. In performances where plays 1 to 5 were played on day one, as shown in the Hm manuscript, the long play 6 would start day two and would prevent waiting on that day.

Davis's model is appealing in many ways. It requires no bells, flares, hourglasses, or messengers to keep time, and even at worst it would prevent wait time after many of the plays. Unfortunately for the single Expositor theory, after considerable chart-drawing I have not been able to work out a way for the single Expositor theory to function using the Davis model of staging and the texts we have available to us. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the idea of Expositor characters who are separate from the guild-based actors is still a useful one. I would still hold that Expositor's interpretive role suggests that he was played either by a small group of riders on horseback who moved among stations or by individuals who waited at the separate stations for the pageant wagons to arrive. In this latter case, Expositor would need to be on horseback not in order to travel between plays, but in order to be seen above the crowd and to have a position of authority somewhere near the level of the pageant stages. In addition, his riding a horse to enter creates a larger disruption of the interaction between the audience and the actors on the wagons than an entrance from the wagon or an entrance on foot would. According to pictures and documents collected by Richard Hosley,<sup>24</sup> the floors of pageant wagons were probably about seven to eight feet high, which is higher than a horse's back. Expositor thus would not dominate from his position on horseback, but he would not be dwarfed, either.

Even if Expositor was played not by one person but by several independently mobile people or by individuals who, separate from the actors on the pageant wagons, waited with the audience at the stations, his effect would still be quite different from the effect of an Expositor who traveled with the individual pageants. Because Expositor is referred to in the stage directions as "Doctor," and because he takes up the role of preacher and interpreter, he was probably costumed as a contemporary cleric. Supposing a distinct Expositor figure in a 1532 processional staging of the Chester cycle speaks the lines printed in the Mills 1992 edition or something similar, probably dressed as a cleric, what are the implications?

In 1532 the Chester cycle is still a Catholic town play played by a predominantly Catholic town to itself. While it is certainly likely that

<sup>24</sup>"Three Kinds of Outdoor Theatre Before Shakespeare," *Theatre Survey* 12 (May 1971) 1-33.

individual townspeople responded in varying ways to the plays, the content and style of the performance emphasized town unity. By inviting the people to participate in the biblical stories and inviting their identification with the characters (as individuals may have identified with the saints whose images they funded, or with the Easter sepulcher where they planned to be buried),<sup>25</sup> by mapping the history of the world in Christ onto the town as contemporary royal entries mapped certain visions of royalty onto cities<sup>26</sup>—in sum, by its inclusive theatricality, the play invited its audience to experience Christ's resurrection and its typological equivalents as a present event, and to see themselves as a spiritual and political unity. Peter Womack writes,

The spectacular proliferation of Christs, so far from being redundant, seems extraordinarily eloquent. The figure of the Redeemer permeates the town, endlessly subdivided, yet one and entire in each embodiment, just as, when the host is broken into pieces, the *verum corpus* is wholly present in each fragment. To perform that consecration of the ordinary environment is much more important than to achieve an economical rendering of the written text. The whole real town—its people, its material resources, its social structure and its topography—is organized into a single spectacle, in which it recognizes itself as the mystical body of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

The deployment of the drama over the town acts to incorporate the whole town into one in Christ. To say this is not to argue that there were no tensions or conflicts within the town, or that the drama created a mystico-religious wholeness forever denied to modern man. Rather, it is

<sup>25</sup>In *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago 1989), Gail McMurray Gibson writes of wealthy, childless Anne Harling who funded stained glass images of St. Elizabeth, the saint who conceived a John the Baptist in her old age (104–105), and of John Clopton, whose tomb was also used as the Easter sepulcher, where “the symbolic ‘burial’ of the host and its joyful Resurrection *elevatio* on Easter morning” took place (92). Clopton left money in his will specifically earmarked for the maintenance of this ritual. Thus he included himself concretely in Christ's resurrection.

<sup>26</sup>In the introductory essay to *The Recept of Ladie Kateryne* (Oxford 1990), Gordon Kipling describes how Katharine of Aragon's royal entry into London becomes a voyage “from earth, through the spheres of the cosmos, to an apotheosis upon the Throne of Honor in heaven” (xv). He states, “The pageants transform the streets of London into the geography of the heavens, and Katharine is allowed to see, as if in a dream, a vision of the honor she may achieve both for herself and for England” (xviii). Thus, a certain vision of the monarchy's role is enacted upon the physical plan of London.

<sup>27</sup>Peter Womack, “Imagining Communities: Theatres and the English Nation in the

to suggest that one aspect of the play's performance was to invite the audience to experience a kind of unity. Since processional staging was not practical if the goal was to have as many audience members watch the show as quickly as possible, the goal must not have been efficient communication of the content of the plays. The very impracticality of processional staging can thus be seen as an argument for the plays' community-binding force. Furthermore, if Peter Travis is right, the plays were amplified from a Passion play to a complete history of the world concurrently with the addition of Expositor.<sup>28</sup> This amplification might have been a sort of swan song, a response to the pressures of print and doctrinal change that were beginning to threaten the Chester civic drama. As part of the amplification, Expositor might have been added to explain and fix the doctrinal meaning of the plays in order to satisfy both external critics and religious men within the town. In addition, it might have been, as Clopper argues in "The History and Development of the Chester Cycle," an assertion of the town's identity and importance.

Martin Stevens supports the idea that the amplification was intended to strengthen the religious force of the play, suggesting that Expositor was an important part of this amplification. He writes, "The Expositor is a unifying device in the cycle, and he gives Chester a very special tone. . . . His may finally be the most important and memorable voice in the cycle. He is clearly a binding force, a figure who helps significantly to give unity to the cycle."<sup>29</sup> Stevens goes on to argue,

If . . . the cycle was first given a composite text in the early 1530s, then it seems likely that its redactor was intent on building into it a defense of orthodoxy and on taking as one of his purposes the demonstration of the efficacy and the desirability of mystery cycles as a way of buttressing the established faith."<sup>30</sup>

For Stevens, the additions to the play reveal the power of God and teach the viewer how to distinguish between real and false miracles. The end of the play occurs when, through the example of anti-Christ, the viewer

Sixteenth Century" in *Culture and History* (n. 10 above) 99.

<sup>28</sup>As mentioned above, Lawrence Clopper concurs that between 1519 and 1530 the plays began to be performed processionally over a three day period, and that the Old Testament sequence was expanded at this time (*Chester* [n. 17 above] liv).

<sup>29</sup>Stevens (n. 11 above) 269.

realizes that representation can only take him/her so far—that truths must ultimately be grasped at

a spiritual level. . . . When, at last, magic is exposed as mere stage trickery—as nothing more than what is repeatedly called the fiend's or 'the devylls phantasie'—he recognizes that the play has indeed come to an end.<sup>31</sup>

Stevens's distinction between "a spiritual level" and the experience of watching/participating in the plays derives more from the later model of literacy-based spirituality than from the participatory model which I am suggesting still applied to some degree in Chester in 1532. Whereas Expositor may help to strengthen the doctrinal meaning of the play in the sense Stevens describes, at the same time he weakens the play as a participatory experience, as Vasquez outlines. Peter Womack writes that by the time the plays were censored by the literate, reformist, nationalist elite, "The syntax of the ritual had become unintelligible."<sup>32</sup> But the contrast between Stevens's and Vasquez's views of Expositor hints that in the 1530s "the syntax of the ritual" was already troubled, in the following sense.

In addition to embodying a spiritual experience, the play in 1532 represented the town as a particular type of political entity. Expanding upon Victor Turner's ideas of anti-structure and *communitas*, and applying them to the Chester cycle, Womack writes that

The spectacle of Corpus Christi embodies the community as both One and Many, the body in its singleness and the members in their diversity. The imagery of the one dissolves intra-communal distinctions and tends towards a utopian and egalitarian vision; to that extent, it can be read, can even function, in an oppositional way. But the hierarchy has to accept that degree of challenge because the underlying unity which is so expressed is the deep source of the hierarchy's own validity. This is the reason, so to speak, why the bishop agrees to lend his cope to the actor playing Caiaphas. Precisely in order to maintain the coherence of its differentiating structures, the town passes periodically through a ritual in which it *both* parades those structures *and at the same time* recognizes itself as a 'community, or even communion of equal individuals.'<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Stevens (n. 11 above) 309.

<sup>31</sup>Stevens (n. 11 above) 315.

<sup>32</sup>Womack (n. 27 above) 103.

<sup>33</sup>Womack (n. 27 above) 102.

Womack's analysis suggests that the cycle allows for dialogic voices within its hierarchical structure because this structure is not fundamentally threatened by them. At the same time, the fact that the text of the Chester cycle was regularly reviewed and approved by civic authorities suggests that those authorities saw the potential for threatening critique in the cycle.<sup>34</sup> Still, what happens when the "utopian and egalitarian vision" of Christ's fellowship is "the deep source of the hierarchy's own validity"? The hierarchy Womack refers to makes sense in terms of the participatory spirituality of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, but not in terms of print-based, individualistic spirituality. The print-based spirituality which became characteristic of the Reformation religious sensibility may already have been present in the Chester cycle in the form of Expositor in 1532, however. Introduced into the play to fix and control meaning, Expositor undermines the vision of unity in Christ on which the hierarchy had been based. At the same time as an aesthetic of inclusion writes the whole history of man from creation to doom onto the specific geography of the town, Expositor introduces an aesthetic of distance and contemplation and delocalized, disembodied truth.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup>As mentioned above, the cycle text was not fixed. Since the five manuscripts which contain versions of the complete Chester cycle date from 1591–1607, exactly what text was performed at any given time is uncertain. Lumiansky and Mills have established the existence of an exemplar kept at the Pentice office (site of city government), from which guild producers could take copies of their particular plays for rehearsal and performance. This "Regenall" was not itself a fixed or "best" text, but rather offered performance alternatives. Lumiansky and Mills suggest a date after the early 1530s for the Regenall, with "the word evidence" suggesting an early sixteenth-century date, and "confident inclusion of Roman Catholic belief" that could not "have been theologically acceptable in its fullest form after 1562 and at certain periods before that time" (R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Cycle: Essays and Documents* [Chapel Hill 1983] 48) suggesting a date before 1562. They conclude that "the bulk of evidence" suggest that the exemplar "took material shape" between 1500 and 1550, emphasizing that: "What emerges from a study of the manuscripts is a sense of flexibility and an awareness of the responsibility that lay with both the civic authorities and the guild producers for determining the cycle-form from year to year" (86).

<sup>35</sup>Peter Womack explores the connections between the rise of print and the shift to national culture, writing that "[Archbishop] Grindal's dual policy at York is typically Protestant . . . at once suppressing ritual observances (including plays) and laboring to establish a learned ministry in the parishes, he was expressing, and enforcing a shift in the center of doctrinal gravity from ceremony to discourse, from image to word. What this does is to *delocalise* the language of religious truth. Whereas symbolism ties the universality of Christian doctrine to particular times (festival days) and places (church building, shrines, the routes of processions and pilgrimages), the word is immaterial and ubiquitous, its validity quite unaffected by where and when it happens to be uttered"

A single Expositor also would not participate directly in the guild hierarchies. Mervyn James writes that “the play cycles provided a mechanism . . . by which the tensions implicit in the diachronic rise and fall of occupational communities could be confronted and worked out.”<sup>36</sup> That is, the Corpus Christi plays could allow the guilds to accommodate conflict without violence. Each play was an expression of the guild that produced it. If a guild lost status or suffered a decline in its economic fortunes, it could lose its play or be assigned a less expensive, less prestigious play. In this way, “the implications of change could be given recognition and incorporated with a minimum of friction to the structure of the social body.”<sup>37</sup> An Expositor who did not belong to any particular guild would cut across this system. His inclusion would possibly suggest that this system was already ceasing to function in the way James describes, or would help to break down the system, or both. With an independent Expositor speaking, the play would be less about the honor of each guild, and more about the religious “understanding” expressed by Expositor. The competition for honor among the guilds would no longer be included within the story of Christ. The kernel of religious truth gleaned by Expositor from the narrative would be the meaning of the play, and it would lose its politico-civic resonances. The meaning of the play would be flattened out and limited.

The drama would still serve to mediate conflict, but the conflict mediated would be between religious sensibilities, not between guilds. A single Expositor represents the conflict between the new (discursive, fixed-meaning) religious sensibility and the old, between religion and town politics, between national concerns and the interests of the town. The concept of the drama as a dialogic event which allows different voices to be heard is useful again here. It is not at all clear that Expositor-as-discursive-reader-and-interpretor would dominate the 1532 drama.

Many of the adult males of the town, and a few children, would be impersonating spiritually charged characters in the play, including God, Jesus, and Devils, and the reaction of some of the characters to Expositor might be less than reverential. In play 5, surely the talking ass

(Womack [n. 27 above] 106).

<sup>36</sup>James (n. 11 above) 15.

<sup>37</sup>James (n. 11 above) 15.



would get more attention than the Expositor's sermonizing. The Messenger seems eager to announce Balaack and Balaam at the end of play 4, speaking after Expositor has offered a more contemplative ending to the play and disrupting the tone he has set. At the end of play 4, the Messenger's words "I may no longer abide" also open the possibility that some open conflict exists between Expositor and the Messenger. This conflict could be played up with gestures by the Messenger and a firm look of disapproval by Expositor. The force of such a conflict on stage would be greater in 1532 than in 1575 when the play was last performed.

The conditions for the final, 1575 performance are quite different from the those for the 1532 performance I have suggested. In 1575 the play is not mapped over the whole city. Rather,

The Whitson Playes played in pageantes in this citye at Midsomer to the great dislike of many because the playe was in on part of the city.<sup>38</sup>

Most scholars have interpreted this passage to mean that the last performance took place at one station, probably the Pentice Hall (the civic center). On the one hand, this choice of venue emphasizes the crucial role of the guilds and the civic government in the production of the play. On the other hand, the confinement of the play to one venue means that the play ceases to function in the same way as an embodiment of unity-in-hierarchy.

The plays move to midsummer for the 1575 performance, a time associated with the profit-making midsummer show, and without religious significance. If it had not been for the mayoralty of one John Savage, who was later accused of recusancy, it is possible that the plays would not have been performed at all, as Archbishop Grindal had attempted to prevent their performance in 1572. As Richard Emmerson points out, at least one guild member, Andrew Tailer, a dyer, was jailed for refusing to pay his contribution to the 1575 performance. Apparently Tailer saw contributing to the play not as an integral part of his participation in the town's functioning, but as an individual act which was contrary to his religious beliefs.<sup>39</sup> By 1571 Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, the Bishop's

<sup>38</sup>Harley 2125, fol. 40v, in Lumiansky and Mills (n. 35 above) 230–231.

<sup>39</sup>Richard K. Emmerson, "Contextualizing Performance: The Reception of the Chester Antichrist," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29.1 (1999) 89–90.

Bible, and the Book of Common Prayer were “made available for common reading . . . in every cathedral.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, religious experience began increasingly to be defined not only by non-Catholic doctrine, but also by internalized, discursive understanding. In addition to the effects of literacy, the existence of politicized, defined religious factions emphasized the individual’s choice in shaping his own worship.

Although the cycle plays recalled Catholicism in their lavish visual appeal and their inclusion of the last supper and the annunciation, the late Banns characterize their writer as a monk with secret Protestant leanings, who wanted to make the Bible more accessible to an ignorant, illiterate audience. In the 1575 performance, the Baker’s Last Supper, which had been left out of the cycle during the earlier Reformation, has reappeared and is carefully explained in the Banns as “a memorial” (Late Banns, line 135), not the recreation of the last supper. The Banns thus frame the Last Supper as a representational event. This is just one important way in which the Late Banns present the final performance as cut off from its ritual root. The elements that were once a central part of the inclusion of the audience in the cultic experience, including the last supper, the crucifixion, the Balaack and Balaam fun, and “some things not warranted by any writ” (Late Banns, line 13) are described as “Only to make sport” or “in play” or “a memorial” to be experienced “with accustomed cheerful heart.” They are relegated to the realm of meaningless play, of silliness, and cut off from the serious play that allowed the community to express the divine together. The Banns privilege, instead, written authority, as Vasquez, Mills, and others have pointed out.

In the 1575 context, Expositor’s role becomes more convincing. No longer competing with a powerful, inclusive drama, he has now to contend only with quaint figures. In 1575 his explications of the prophets, his disquisition on the meaning of Abraham and Isaac, his reminder that in the laws given to Moses “ten points there been—that takes intent”<sup>41</sup> no longer invite mockery or questioning. The background noise of the new political and religious context draws a new resonance from his role<sup>42</sup> and his statements become a major authority in the text.

<sup>40</sup>Emmerson (n. 39 above) 92.

<sup>41</sup>Mills (n. 1 above) 86.

<sup>42</sup>Wai Chi Dimock’s idea of resonance derives from studies of noise in the physical sciences.

Lumiansky and Mills point out that the Chester Abraham and Isaac is “a play that is thematically structured, looking toward the Old Testament prefigurations of two major sacraments (the only sacraments under the 39 articles of the Church of England) and the historical event that confirmed the transition from one ‘sacramental form’ to another.”<sup>43</sup> In the 1575 atmosphere, Expositor’s function as a legitimate authority of this Protestant meaning in the play would be highlighted.

If the plays were still staged processionally, but in a single location, Expositor could be played by a single individual who would remain with the audience. He would not have to travel through the crowd as he might in the processional staging model. He would become a reader of the text of the play for the audience, an interpreter of this strange drama from the past whose voice could be trusted to deliver the true, Reformist meaning of the play.

Just as the text of the Chester cycle was not fixed and the social context for the cycle was not fixed, the impact of Expositor varied from 1532 to 1575. In the earlier production I have posited, Expositor’s position as an interpreter was not secure. Although I suggest that he was either one person or a group of people separate from the cast of players associated with each guild, and that this performance choice would emphasize his role as interpreter, the overwhelming effect of the inclusive theatrical experience created by processional staging would minimize his impact. In the later, true Reformation performance, the playing of the plays at just one station and the change in the resonance of the more comic characters, who have now become “quaint,” would privilege Expositor’s interpretive role. Indeed, sponsors of the play relied on Expositor’s tone and interpretations, now perceived as Reformist, to rescue the play from charges of papacy.

The fact that the 1575 performance was carried out in spite of considerable opposition suggests that it still had some important function. The cycle may have served to attract people and business to the town or to announce to the world that everything was just fine in Chester.<sup>44</sup> But perhaps on one level this last performance could represent an attempt to reach back towards the suggestion of ritual unity implied by the old playing style. The new social function of the play would be in part the

<sup>43</sup>Lumiansky and Mills (n. 34 above) 91.

<sup>44</sup>John Coldewey, “Some Economic Aspects of the Late Medieval Drama” in *Contexts for Early English Drama* (n. 11 above) 88.

expression of nostalgia for an idealized time when *communitas* was enacted, when individuals were not so tortured by their separation from individuals, when everyone had a place.<sup>45</sup>

This study could be accused of expressing a similar nostalgia.<sup>46</sup> In *The Future of Ritual* and *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner alludes to modern theatrical and ritual attempts to reach a state of *communitas*. While Schechner sees in the actor's practice of being both "self" and "not self" a real possibility for overcoming the sense of isolation in one's own mortality, he sees modern theatrical attempts to make this escape as ultimately unsuccessful. Jerzy Grotowski, his main example of such attempts, has staged workshops that involve a group of actors secluding themselves and developing rituals together. But searching for an ultimate truth to bring their experience together, the actors travel the paths of modern psychology, which are finally individualistic. The actors lack a common mythology and tradition that would represent them as bound together as a Corpus Christi feast might once have done. In a postmodern world where every self is defined by the existence of an unknowable other, where the use of language is fraught with hierarchy, and where we are still trying to make sense of the world by writing and talking about it, the appeal of a drama that (we are tempted to imagine) would offer (even partially or intermittently) a feeling of basic connection to others and to the universe lingers.

Department of English  
University of Wisconsin  
H. C. White Hall  
600 Park Street  
Madison, WI 53706

<sup>45</sup>*Communitas* is the term Victor Turner uses to characterize the non-hierarchical meeting of identities possible in positive liminal or liminoid states: "Where it is socially positive, [liminality] presents, directly or by implication, a model of human society as a homogeneous, unstructured *communitas*, whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species (n. 19 above, 45).

<sup>46</sup>Thanks to John Coldewey for introducing me to the idea of spiritual nostalgia in his unpublished paper, "The Way Things Never Were: Spiritual Nostalgia in Medieval Theatre." Coldewey's own source is Michel de Certeau's *La Fable Mystique: XVIe–XVIIe siècle* (Paris 1987).