Title
The Didactic Structure of the Chester Sacrifice of Isaac

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THE DIDACTIC STRUCTURE
OF THE CHESTER
"SACRIFICE OF ISAAC"

The story of Abraham's command from God to sacrifice his son inspired the authors of the mystery plays to a generally impressive level of performance. Six Middle English versions of the story survive, more than any other Old Testament story.[1] The episode itself had been one of the most widely known from the Old Testament and was commonly treated in the written, spoken and visual arts of the period.[2]

Of the six Middle English treatments one, the York version, is generally considered inferior to the rest; it sacrifices pathetic appeal to a sort of typological realism in casting Isaac as a grown man rather than a child.[3] Two of the remaining pageants, the

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[1] For the versions of the four surviving cycles see: *The Chester Plays*, ed. Hermann Deimling and J. Matthews, (EETS es 62, 115; 1892, 1915); *Ludus Coventriae or The Plaie Called Corpus Christi*, ed. K. S. Block (EETS es 120, 1922); *The Towneley Plays*, ed. George England and Alfred W. Pollard (EETS es 71, 1897); *York Mystery Plays*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith (New York, 1963 [1885]). The Brome and the Dublin (or Northampton) versions are both in *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. Norman Davis (EETS ss 1, 1970). The text of a Cornish version is in *The Ancient Cornish Drama*, ed. and trans. Edwin Norris, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1859); a modern translation has been made by Markham Harris: *The Cornish Ordinalia: A Medieval Dramatic Trilogy* (Washington, D.C., 1969).

[2] On the popularity of the Abraham and Isaac story see Rosemary Woolf, "The Effect of Typology on the English Mediaeval Plays of Abraham and Isaac," *Spec*, 32 (1957), 806-808; she concludes that, "in an age when the typological interpretation of the Old Testament was everywhere well known and accepted, there was no type which was so popular, so familiar, and so recurrent" (p. 808).

[3] Cf. Woolf, p. 813; Minnie E. Wells, "The Age of Isaac at the Time of the Sacrifice," *MLN*, 54 (1939), pp. 579-82. This point has become confused by

Brome and Dublin versions, are ranked among the very best of the surviving mysteries, although we cannot be sure that either actually belonged to a cycle. The Chester version has usually suffered in comparison with its Brome and Dublin counterparts, which excel in their development of the pathos of the story,[4] and it has received no detailed analysis. This study will concentrate on the structure of the Chester version in an attempt to document a subtlety in the play that is worthy of more consideration than it has received.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Chester Isaac pageant is its inclusion of Melchizedek's offering and the institution of the rite of circumcision. Although the latter incident is not unique to Chester, the presentation of Melchizedek's offering occurs in none of the other five Middle English versions of the story.[5] Pollard thought the Chester pageant an amalgamation;[6] but there is no evidence to support this view and, if structural considerations be admitted, strong reason to discredit it.

claims that Isaac was an adult in other versions as well. Arnold Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England* (Michigan State Univ., 1961), p. 68, thinks the Towneley Isaac was an adult, although the play claims for him an innocence theologically impossible to an adult (cf. l. 219, edn. cited above). Miss Wells thinks the *Ludus Coventriae* Isaac was an adult because "the play, though making no explicit statement as to Isaac's age, represents him as voicing mature sentiments" (p. 180). V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, Calif., 1966), p. 315, argues that the Dublin Isaac was probably adult since his youth is not mentioned.

[4] On Brome and Dublin see Williams, p. 64 and Kolve, pp. 257-9; these are compared with Chester by Wells, p. 57; Carrie A. Harper, "A Comparison Between the Brome and Chester Plays of *Abraham and Isaac*," *Radcliffe College Monographs*, 15 (1910), p. 65; J. Burke Severs, "The Relationship Between the Brome and Chester Plays of *Abraham and Isaac*," *MP*, 42 (1945), pp. 137, 151. The last two items deal with the extensive but ambiguous textual relationship between Brome and Chester.

[5] The institution of circumcision occurs in the York pageant as well as in that of Chester. John R. Elliot, Jr., "The Sacrifice of Isaac as Comedy and Tragedy," *SP*, 66 (1969) must ignore the first two parts of the pageant in order to fit it into a standard form (p. 45); but the additional material is one of the Chester version's distinctive characteristics.

[6] Alfred W. Pollard, ed., *English Miracle Plays, Moralities and Interludes* (Oxford, 1927), p. 185.

The real point of interest is the way this unique material is presented in the Chester pageant. The offering of Melchizedek appears as a distinct unit, separated from the rest of the action by the Expositor's explanation (ll. 113-144). In fact, the institution of circumcision (connected with God's promise to give Abraham an heir) appears as a second distinguishable unit, bracketed by the Expositor's first speech and his second (ll. 193-208).[7] After this, the main action of the sacrifice begins and runs without interruption to its conclusion. The sharpness of the distinctions has led to discussion of the pageant's unity and to attempts to assess the connections between the three parts. One approach to this question lies in the typological significance of the three units, which the Expositor himself makes explicit. J. A. Bryant has conveniently summarized several relevant considerations of this order. After noting a certain unity created simply by Abraham's presence in each part, and by their equal amenity to typological reading, he turns to the typology itself:

> The offering of Melchizedek . . . prefigures the Eucharist; the rite of circumcision, that of baptism; and the sacrifice of Isaac, that of Christ on the cross. All of these interpretations, of course, are commonplace products of the tradition of 'allegorical' exegesis, which, as Christian exegesis, can be traced at least as far back as Clement of Rome in the first century. . . ."[8]

The Expositor makes these interpretations clear enough himself and, as Bryant says, it is only their particular combination which is unusual.[9] Consideration of that fact leads Bryant to a very useful conclusion:

> The three Chester episodes . . . laid side by side and interpreted as they are, make a unique trio. They form a neat and striking compendium of the Christian faith, communion and baptism being the two essential sacraments of that faith, and the death and resurrection of Jesus its central mystery. Moreover, since communion and baptism are in themselves the supreme ritualistic symbols of the central mystery, introduction of them

[7] All references to the Chester play are to Deimling's edn., *op. cit.*

[8] J. A. Bryant, Jr., "Chester's Sermon for Catechumens," *JEGP*, 53 (1954), pp. 399-400.

[9] Bryant, p. 400.

by way of commentary enables the pageant to suggest the full historical range of the divine plan of redemption.[10]

Bryant's formula is reliable, I feel, and opens the way for a fuller appreciation of the artistic unity he here implies.

The Expositor's interpretation leaves no doubt of the pertinence of such symbolic considerations to the Chester version of the Sacrifice of Isaac. That symbolic interpretation does not claim to be exhaustive, however, and it does suggest certain questions. Why does the dramatist choose to link types of the Eucharist and of Baptism to the story of Isaac in the first place?[11] And if the only explanation of the Melchizedek action and the institution of circumcision lies in their symbolic reference, what distinct function can be claimed for these two parts of the pageant? In short, the symbolism of the three sections of the pageant does not provide its own *raison d'être* nor does it explain the specific features of its presentation here.

The inadequacy of this analysis lies in the brand of typology being applied. Bryant notes that his interpretations originate in "the tradition of 'allegorical' exegesis," as indeed they do. Their exclusively "allegorical" aspect is the root of their inadequacy here. The allegorical, or Hellenic, exegetes emphasized just such symbolism as the Expositor of the Chester pageant enunciates, to the neglect of the literal meaning of the Old Testament. A different approach was taken by the Hebraic, or properly typological, exegetes, who accorded the literal sense a fuller emphasis. For them the Old Testament narrative related factual history and its spiritual symbolism depended theologically on its genuine historicity. It was God who so ordered history that an Old Testament event would reliably refer to a New Testament event; the concrete events of history are the very means of communication, and both the validity and the significance of the metaphorical relationship between any two of them assume their historicity. For the very fact that God had thus ordered historical events was an important part of the significance of a typological pattern.

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[10] Bryant, p. 401.
[11] If a symbolic compendium of the faith is the only goal, why is penance, so much emphasized during this period, omitted?

Employing in this way a more balanced emphasis, the Hebraic exegetes formulated a more balanced definition of typology: a type, they said, is a historical person or event which prefigures another historical person or event. By this definition, the interpretation so far advanced of the Chester Isaac pageant is not fully typological at all, for it ignores the historicity of the material. The interpretation is very much "allegorical," and as such might satisfy a Hellenic exegete; however it would constitute only part of a Hebraic exegete's full analysis, which would follow the more basic literal interpretation. Genuine typology requires a fusion of the historical perspective with the spiritual, symbolic one.[12]

If the Expositor is mainly interested in the symbolism of the events dramatized, the Chester dramatist does not limit himself to that method of expression. The pageant as a whole is properly typological, for it unites a fully historical perspective to the symbolic one already presented. This historical perspective is evident in the very selection of subject matter, in the structure formed by the three distinct plot units, in the causal connection between these incidents, and in the theological implications of the pageant's careful control of audience involvement. The Expositor's interpretations offer a predominantly symbolic perspective; the events of the pageant themselves present the historical perspective.[13] The

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[12] For introductory treatments of these two exegetical orientations see Charles Donahue, "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: Summation," in *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature*, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York, 1960), 61-82; Erich Auerbach, "Figura," trans. Ralph Manheim, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (New York, 1959 [1944]), 11-79; G. W. H. Lampe, "The Reasonableness of Typology" and K. J. Woollcombe, "The Biblical Origins and Patristic Development of Typology" which together comprise *Essays on Typology*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe (Naperville, Ill., 1957); Robert E. McNally, S. J., *The Bible in the Early Middle Ages* (Newman Press, 1959). Standard full-scale studies are Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Blackwell's, 1952); Ceslaus Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au moyen âge* (Paris, 1944); Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* (Paris, 1959); Jean Danielou, S. J., *From Shadows to Reality. Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Dom Wulstan Hibberd (London, 1960).

[13] But the two perspectives are not completely segregated. In ll. 91-2 Melchizedek says of his offering, "much good yt may signifie/ in tyme that

two perspectives combine to form a genuine typological pattern. Consequently, a fully typological reading not only reveals the function of the literal events, it also exposes the fundamental unity between event and interpretation, between history and doctrine, which the pageant achieves.

A brief summary of the action will indicate the causal or historical connections among the three distinct units. The audience first sees Abraham after his important victory, that is, after he has just received a favor from God. Next, Abraham expresses his gratitude for this favor in an offering to Melchizedek:[14] these two actions of the first part (one narrated and the second dramatized) are connected on the literal level, for the second is a response to the first. In the second section God acknowledges Abraham's offering made in section one (ll. 145-148), and Abraham takes that opportunity to pray for an heir. God responds in turn by granting Abraham's request, and also by making a "forward" with him. For if God is going to grant Abraham a son, he on his side must reciprocate by being faithful to God.[15] But God is so pleased with Abraham that He goes him one better: He will not only grant him an heir, but goodly seed beyond numbering and, ultimately, "one Child of great degree / all mankind shall forbye" (ll. 175-176). In return, God commands that the rite of circumcision be introduced.

The second part of the play, then, follows causally from the first. This connection can be overshadowed by calling the first part "Melchizedek's offering": actually, Abraham's actions in it

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is cominge"; in ll. 121-4, 133-6, and 193-8 the Expositor clarifies the literal meaning of the historical situation. John R. Elliott, Jr., "The Sacrifice of Isaac as Comedy and Tragedy," *SP*, 66 (1969), p. 41, demonstrates the importance of the historical perspective by comparing the cycles' dramatic treatment of this story to the thoroughly symbolic version of it in *Cursor Mundi* and *A Middle English Paraphrase of the Old Testament*.

[14] God that hase send me victorye
  of 4 kinges graciouslie,
  with him my praye parte will I.

                    (ll. 37-39)

[15] "Wherfore, Abraham, servant free,/ loke that thou be trewe to me" (ll. 169-70).

are more important to the causal or historical perspective.[16] And it might be suspected that if the first section links causally to Abraham's request for and God's promise of a son in section two, this second section (and through it the first) will mesh neatly with the commanded sacrifice of that same son in part three. The connection here between the promise of an heir, and the sacrifice of that heir, should be obvious enough to forestall problems of unity between the second and third parts. Moreover, the third part recalls the first insofar as Abraham had begun by making a voluntary and virtuous offering and now is commanded to make another, still voluntary (he can disobey if he chooses) but more virtuous. In the third section, as in the first, Abraham consents to sacrifice, and God responds by approving his action. In the third section, as in the second, God rewards Abraham's virtue with a son.

In this way the three incidents presented are linked in a strict chain of historical causality. Had they no symbolic import whatever, they would still constitute a coherent and orderly progression of events, laced together as well by the repetitive parallelism between their situations. The dramatist does not merely follow his source narrative blindly; indeed, the events are separated in the *Genesis* account. The actual selection of these three events and the original grouping given them here implies some sensitivity to their historical coherence.

The coherence of the three units exceeds these causal connections, however, since the events dramatized do not entirely neglect the symbolic aspect of their typology. To a significant extent, the symbolic and historical perspectives coexist in the short first two parts of the play, paralleling or counterpointing each other, but nearly always distinct. In the third part, however, these two perspectives merge into a unifying fusion. The more integral focus of this section still contains glimpses of the two previously distinguishable strands, but they are far more closely intertwined than before. The separate details of the action in the last section

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[16] The title of the whole pageant in Harl. 2124, on which Deimling bases his text, reads "Pagina Quarta de Abrahamo *et* Melchisedech et Loth"; the other four MSS omit a title.

figure in each of the two perspectives more consistently than before, and in such a way as to suggest a thematic point to their new, more intimate relationship. The fusion works most intensely in the vibrating paradox of the sacrifice itself.

In the first two parts of the play, the symbolic and the historical strands are kept separate mainly by being fixed to different concrete vehicles. In part one it is Melchizedek's offering which invites symbolic interpretation, while Abraham's offering works primarily in the causal perspective. The two actions relate to each other through the plot action, of course, but they remain two distinct actions, each bearing a different emphasis and a different division of the labor of a full typology. Similarly, in the second part it is the institution of circumcision that functions symbolically, while Abraham's request and God's promise of a son continue the historical, causal connection from part one into part three. But in the third section there is only one action which must simultaneously serve both perspectives. The series of events which transpires demonstrates obvious causal connection: God commands the sacrifice of Isaac; therefore Abraham carries out the sacrifice; therefore God interrupts it and saves Isaac. Yet the symbolism of this action is the most thorough and by far the most basic in the pageant.

What does this fusion of both the historical and symbolic perspectives accomplish? By relating them in this essentially typological way the dramatist makes a thematic statement which embraces them both: the two perspectives are, he says, fundamentally and intensely integrated. The dramatist shows that they are so integrated by, in effect, showing that each one really shares its counterpart's qualities. Thus the historical perspective unites with the symbolic: the causal sequence of events finally issues into the sacrifice itself, producing the symbolic apex. And the reverse is true. The symbolic incident, because it necessarily derives from the historical situation that the plot portrays, shows that these historical incidents carry symbolic implications in their progress through the steps of God's plan of history. There is a mutual interdependence between these two categories or perspectives which bespeaks something of the relationship between God and man, between Providence and the history of human

actions: had Abraham not been willing to sacrifice his son, God would not have been willing to sacrifice His.

In this way the pageant can almost be said to dramatize the construction of a major biblical type. The dramatist begins with the two components of any typology, history and symbolism; he presents them in distinguishable forms; and then he fuses them to show the finished work to the audience. The fusion works theologically, of course, in demonstrating clearly and convincingly a typological pattern effected by God. Further, the progress towards the integral type that is finally achieved parallels, and depends on, the progress of the God-man relationship in the pageant, from initial commitment to deeper and more meaningful commitment. In the conclusion each party has demonstrated its willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for the other, and the final relationship between God and Abraham is strong enough to serve as a foundation for God's redemption of the whole human race.

One further characteristic of the Chester Isaac pageant, one which will incidentally reveal the play's unity in an entirely different light, deserves explanation. It was once fashionable to consider the Expositor as a dramatic crudity, a primitive technique for conveying hulks of doctrine to a not very sensitive audience.[17] But if the triple structure of the pageant is as important as the preceding analysis claims, obviously the Expositor does good service in punctuating that division by his speeches. But the Expositor's function goes further than that. Two of his three speeches occur before the main action of the play; they interpret the short and not very emotional first and second parts. In each case he explains first the symbolism of the primarily symbolic incident

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[17] Salter finds the Chester plays "over-filled with didactic instruction" (*Medieval Drama in Chester*, New York, 1968 [1955], p. 34); A. P. Rossiter, positing the growth of the cycle from "a small group of episodes with an expositor" finds it "the most low-toned and didactic" of the cycles (*English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans*, New York, 1967 [1950], p. 72); G. R. Owst (*Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, Cambridge, 1933, p. 493) claims that "the expanded parts of the Abraham and Isaac plays can be shown likewise to be a dramatization of current pulpit themes setting forth the right and dutiful relations between parent and child."

(Melchizedek's offering; institution of circumcision) and then the literal meaning of the primarily historical incident (Abraham's tithes; God's promise of an heir). In so doing the Expositor sets up the two perspectives of the pageant and establishes the terms in which the main action of the sacrifice can be fully understood. Then the audience is plunged into the pathos and emotional involvement of the sacrifice itself. This action, which fuses the two perspectives of the play, also makes the greatest emotional demands on the audience. When it is over and Abraham has sacrificed the lamb, God appears to restate His promise to Abraham, thus returning the audience to the larger and emotionally less intense level of parts one and two; the Expositor follows and interprets the main action as he had the first two, thus also returning to the larger context. His final prayer, in behalf of himself and the audience, implicitly depends on the large context: if the audience is to be obedient as Abraham was, it will be through the redemptive power of Jesus, to which the sacrifice relates historically and symbolically.

The Expositor, then, functions as a control over the emotional involvement of the audience. In the first two speeches he sets up the framework for the main action; there is relative detachment here, while the audience is being "equipped" for the plunge into the sacrifice. When that comes, concrete and emotional immediacy assumes dominance over the audience. Then, after the personal action, the Expositor pulls his audience out of this involvement, leads them back from the intense detail to the larger viewpoint, establishing an emotional pattern for the pageant as a whole. The deep emotional involvement of the sacrifice action, achieved through Isaac's pathos and Abraham's internal conflict, is necessary to convey effectively the aesthetic fusion attained in that section, to support the aesthetic-theological development with an emotional development of comparable magnitude.[18] But twenty pageants yet remain in the cycle, and consequently a larger, less immediate and engrossing viewpoint must be re-established at

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[18] Elliott comments, "Pathos is abundantly present but never for its own sake, rather it serves to heighten the peripeteia from sorrow to joy" (p. 53).

the end of the pageant if it is not to exceed the limits of its function within the whole cycle.[19] The messenger commands us to "make rome" in our emotional responses just as he clears an area for the following pageant.

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[19] Elliott finds this large context necessary for the internal operation of the pageant as well; when Renaissance versions substitute subjective moral issues for historical significance, an entirely different tone, moral view, and structure result (pp. 54-59).