"TO SHORTEN TYME":

DANIEL 13 AND THOMAS GARTER'S <u>COMMODY OF SUSANNA</u>

Ruth Dean
The University of Akron--Wayne College

Thomas Garter's <u>The Commody of the moste vertuous and Godlye Susanna</u>, published in 1578 and probably written about ten years earlier, is an English morality play about Susanna and the Elders, based on the apocryphal chapter 13 of the book of Daniel. Called a hybrid morality because it mixes "real" characters with allegorical ones, this play has been criticized for combining obscenity with a moral lesson, for being "inartistic" (Doran 188), and for its complicated exposition (Campbell 218-22). <u>The Commody of Susanna</u>'s mixture of genres does provide an interpretive challenge for the modern audience. Unused to a combination of secular and scriptural material, how are we to understand this play? A particular difficulty for modern readers is the apparently unbiblical way that <u>The Commody of Susanna</u>'s iconic time transforms the terse linear exposition of Daniel 13.

The hybrid nature of <u>The Commody of Susanna</u> affects not only the play's real and allegorical characters but also its image of time: the two genres, morality play and biblical narrative, have different ways of representing time. In <u>The Commody of Susanna</u> the straight-line, historic time exposition of Daniel 13 is mixed with iconic time, a non-linear mode of representing events that is quite different from the direct chronological narrative of the story of Susanna and the Elders in the Bible. Yet <u>The</u>

Commody of Susanna would have been much less
confusing to its original audience than it has
been to modern readers. The sixteenth-century
audience was used to the vivid, earthy Vice and
other allegorical characters, and it was also
accustomed to seeing represented on stage the
eternal power of God, a lesson drawn from Daniel
13 and amplified in The Commody of Susanna.

A genre is a set of expectations, as Hans
Robert Jauss points out in "Theory of Genres and
Medieval Literature" (22). He argues that these
expectations are like "rules of the game" (88).
These rules for each genre should be understood
as what the original audience for a work would
have considered normal rather than as ideal
prescriptions for what ought to be admired.
That is, the rules of the game for a particular
genre should not be criteria which could be used
to evaluate a text; rather they should simply
describe the genre, showing what the genre's
audience would expect, would understand as
normal. For example, we don't judge the quality
of a western by whether it has a chase scene
with horses; we simply recognize the text as a
western by this element. The challenge in
reading The Commody of Susanna, then, is not to
criticize the play for its iconic time mode, but
to learn to see how iconic time works.

In his article "Historic and Iconic Time in
Late Tudor Drama," Bernard Beckerman describes
iconic time as "not subject to the changeability
of events." Its immutability is "continually
being verified by demonstration, and thus
verified, confirms truth in absoluteness" (47).
Beckerman sees the medieval mind as aware of
both changeable and unchangeable time but as
more interested in eternal, iconic time, while
"the men of the Renaissance shifted their gaze
to the ebb and flow of daily existence" (48).
Yet even later Renaissance plays show the static

visual patterns and interrupted time flow of medieval drama. Alan Dessen's Elizabethan Drama and the Viewer's Eye discusses this issue in reference to Marlowe and Shakespeare. Dessen emphasizes that the moralities were the popular plays of these playwrights' youth, not the more critically acclaimed craft cycles or large-scale plays like The Castle of Perseverance.

Dessen extends to other plays of the period Wilbur Sanders' analysis of the debate between Dr. Faustus' two angels: "It is the act of choice in slow motion, a dramatization of his strained attention to the faint voices of unconscious judgment" (Sanders 217). This change in the apparent flow of time is an effective part of the genre, Dessen argues: "[T]o the critic nurtured on Henry James, the stage psychomachia may seem a blemish on an otherwise complex tragedy, but in the theater such a suspension or slowing down of the process of choice may be a worthy equivalent to the novelist's presentation of interior states of consciousness" (137). The Commody of Susanna reflects the generic image of iconic, immutable time that Sanders and Dessen have analyzed in later, more well-known plays. Garter's play combines this generic dramatic trait, descending from the morality and Corpus Christi plays (Kolve 101-23), with the straight-line historic exposition of Daniel 13, the image of time which modern audiences tend to consider normal.

Beckerman emphasizes the power of iconic time to confirm "truths in absoluteness" (47), including "the perfect chastity of Thomas Garter's Susanna" (49). Illustrating and confirming absolute truth is the overt goal of the didactic popular morality genre. The Commody of Susanna's alterations in historic time help insure that this play, to quote its Prologue, "sheweth forth how prone God is, to

help such as are just" (l. 8). Nevertheless, Beckerman sees the use of iconic time by a playwright as a problem, a challenge to the very nature of his medium (48). To Beckerman, drama is fundamentally dynamic, keeping the audience's attention by unfolding a linear plot.

However, Robert Potter, in The English Morality Play: Origins, History and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition, shows how different the morality play is from modern drama, in which the dynamic exposition of plot seems to represent "realistic" events. As Potter says:

> In a purely theatrical sense, the morality play is a drama of ideas. The events which occur on stage in the course of the play are not mimetic representations of life, but analogic demonstrations of what life is about. The stage is the world; the time, the present. (33)

Allegorical absoluteness of character, present-time exposition of ancient events, and an English setting--all these characteristics of classic moralities are also present in Garter's late morality play, "hybrid" though it is. In general, the late, hybrid morality plays do seem more dedicated to popular entertainment than the earlier "pure" moralities had been, though they retain many characteristics inherited from earlier drama. Potter describes the late moralities as having "a unique jumble of intellectual and theatrical elements, admonitory satire, stage horseplay, morality figures, the Vice, classical allusions, and Calvinism" (108-09). Yet however jumbled The Commody of Susanna may seem, a close look at its use of time will reveal a consistent adherence to its Prologue's stated goal.

Along with its particular "jumble of
intellectual and theatrical elements," The
Commody of Susanna does have a one-day,
"Aristotelian" time unity. However, this is
probably due, not to the newly rediscovered
classical model, but to the play's source; the
events of Daniel 13 take place on one day, in
one place (Herrick 135). In the Geneva Bible,
the entire "Historie of Susanna, which some
joyne to the end of Daniel, and make it the 13.
chap" is told in only sixty-five verses. The
style is simple and direct. Though ancient,
this way of telling a story is more a part of a
modern person's "horizon of expectations"
(Jauss, "Theory of Genres" 22) than the much
later mode developed in early English drama.
Verses 42-48 will illustrate the biblical
narrative mode:

> Then Susanna cryed out with a
> loude voyce, and said, O everlasting
> God, that knowest the secrets, and
> knowest all things afore they come to
> pass, Thou knowest, that they have
> borne false witness against me, and
> beholde, I must dye, whereas I never
> did suche things as these men have
> maliciously invented against me. And
> the lord heard her voyce. Therefore
> when she was led to be put to death,
> the lord raised up the holie spirit of
> a yonge childe, whose name was Daniel.
> Who cryed with a loude voyce, I am
> cleane from the blood of this woman.
> Then all the people turned them toward
> him and said, What meane these wordes,
> that thou hast spoken? Then Daniel
> stode in the middes of them and said,
> Are ye suche fooles, o Israelites, that

without examination, ye have condemned
a daughter of Israel?

Garter's play, on the other hand, is 1453
lines long, mostly written in awkward
fourteeners. Exposition of plot is mixed with
the outrageous antics, word play, and doggerel
songs of the Vice, here named Ill Reporte, a
non-biblical character traditionally central to
morality plays. In The Commody of Susanna, time
returns, recurves, and stops, relating ancient
Babylon to Tudor England, tangling the
chronology of the prophet Daniel's life, looking
back to a society two thousand years in the
future, and placing biblical events "within this
Hall" (l. 59). The Commody's anachronisms
include references to chiming clocks, to the
medieval English chivalric court, and to Tudor
judicial procedures. Ill Reporte swears by New
Testament events, and Susanna's father talks of
the events of the burning fiery furnace as if
they have become proverbial.

Therefore it is inaccurate to call The
Commody of Susanna Aristotelian. The morality
genre has different rules of the game. And as
John Weld points out in Meaning in Comedy, the
Elizabethan audience would have been familiar
with these rules, just as we can recognize
within seconds whether we have tuned in to a
western or a soap opera on TV.

The Commody of Susanna's Prologue refers to
the play's two genres, biblical narrative and
popular morality, drawing our attention to a
particular point of conflict between these
genres, their varied modes of time. The
Prologue announces that this play is "a matter
olde, as it were done anew" (l. 7). The Commody
will tell anew the "old" familiar Susanna story,
which it calls "matters grave and sad." The
Prologue then explains how the Tudor morality

genre has altered the biblical narrative: "nought delightes the hart of men on earth, / So much as matters grave and sad, if they be mixt with myrth" (ll. 18-19).

The comic elements of moralities have been seen as inappropriate intrusions into the content of the drama of this period; a forceful example of negative critical assessment is in The Oxford History of English Literature's volume The English Drama 1485-1585, which contains F. P. Wilson's dismissal of these plays for their coarse humor (29). Yet mirth is an essential characteristic of the popular morality genre, usually associated with the evil or foolish characters and with references to local places and customs. The Commody of Susanna's Prologue interprets these generic alterations in the biblical account of Susanna and the Elders, saying of the author, "This hath he done to shorten tyme" (1. 23).

The Commody of Susanna abandons its source's historic time and chronological exposition to bring the events of the biblical story into contemporaneity with the sixteenth-century audience. Walter Hummelen describes this kind of "shift" as a way to deepen the meaning of the ideas being represented on stage. A shift in the mode of time can "connect two simultaneous segments," the same character appearing in both. And as Hummelen points out, a common device of the Elizabethan stage heightens this effect:

> The shortest form of the simultaneous display on stage is the aside. This creates a second situation beside and simultaneously with the already existing situation. . . . The best example is when the aside is addressed to the audience. The audience is then

assigned a part, is turned into a
character. . . . (99-100)

These and other ways of moving into iconic
time are characteristic of many predecessors to
The Commody of Susanna as well, including, for
example, the Corpus Christi plays, another genre
in which scriptural material is mixed with
non-biblical elements. The result is that "the
usual barriers of time become meaningless, and
from this view of history flows the idea that
all ages are spiritually contemporary," as
Walter E. Meyers says of the Wakefield plays
(16).

The Commody of Susanna's use of iconic time
shows good and evil to be present in Elizabethan
England as well as in Susanna's Babylon.
Consider the immediacy of the evil characters.
The Devil begins the action of the play,
complaining that although he wallows "now in
worldly welth" (1. 31, emphasis added), his face
is too "ougly" to approach Susanna. He calls on
his "crafty chylde," Ill Reporte, an allegorical
representation of the unprovoked slander from
which Susanna suffers in the biblical account.
Ill Reporte, however, is not a biblical
character; he's a totally English one.
Outrageous and charming, he dominates the stage
whenever he is on it. It is his actions that
tie the biblical story most tightly to
contemporary Tudor society.

The Devil complains that Ill Reporte has
taken too long to respond to his summons,
adding, "I thinke the theefe be mad" (1. 56).
Ill Reporte flies into a rage:

What quoth hee, now by this day,
I think thee mad to be,
How say you all, within this Hall,

prayer for help, the Lord raises up the spirit
of Danyell, who brings the eternal actions of
God into the present crisis of Susanna's life.
The Vice, growing less attractive now, becoming
shrill and incoherent according to the pattern
his character generally takes at the end of a
morality play, intrudes into Susanna's trial,
which represents the revealing of truth on
earth, with what Jones calls "purely disruptive"
comments (54, 13n). Yet surely the Vice's
slanderous assertions contribute to the play's
goal. His words here are increasingly
ineffective tactics in his losing war to
substitute the evil of ill reports for the
divine benefits of truth.

Directly addressing the audience, "you that
wicked are in deed" (l. 1126), Danyell tells us
to mark well the lesson of the fall of the
Elders. Turning to Sensualitas he adds,

> What sayest thou now Sensualitas, now
>   that thy mate is gone,
> And no man is to help thee here, but
>   thou are left alone.
> Oh olde and crooked cancred Carle,
>   whose auncient wickednesse,
> And rape and rygor thou hast done, now
>   thus detected is. (11. 1151-54)

Now that Danyell has brought the activity of
the Lord into "this Hall," the good characters
leave their biblical Babylon to offer prayers
"for our most noble Queene" (l. 1434), for her
counselors, for "the commons of this realme" (l.
1439) and most immediately, "for this company
gathered here" (l. 1441).

Iconic time would have been a part of the
horizon of expectations of The Commody of
Susanna's audience. I suspect that if they were
familiar with the term "iconic," they would have

disagreed with Beckerman's absolute statement,
"Iconic time . . . is not natural to drama"
(48). Yet iconic time has disappeared so
completely from our ideas of how a story can be
told that only with some effort can we
understand how it works in Garter's play. In
"The Altereity and Modernity of Medieval
Literature," Jauss describes this process as
building "an aesthetic bridge to the foreign
life-world which speaks to [us] again from
literary sources," once these texts have "again
become imaginable for the modern reader" (185).
Peter Happe's review of a production of the
Commody by Nuffield Theatre Studio in May, 1986,
describes such a bridge, a successful modern
staging of Garter's "complex play" (Lindenbaum
111). By following the advice of its Prologue
about how to consider the passage of time in The
Commody of Susanna, we can expand our horizon of
expectations, building bridges to a society
whose dramas have "shortened tyme." This
transformation is a new way of expressing the
ancient idea that God is ever faithful to those
who are just.

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