Reforming Response: Reception Aesthetics in the Chester Cycle

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Since the 1950s, scholars and critics of the medieval drama have considered the unique position of the Chester cycle in the history of Middle English religious theater. The thorough reexamination of manuscripts and documents, including the pre- and post-Reformation Banns of the cycle, indicate that in its present form Chester is a product of the sixteenth century, and that elements previously and misleadingly termed "primitive," "unsophisticated," and "didactic" do not indicate an early composition date. Dating from late Elizabethan and Jacobean times, the extant manuscripts of the Chester cycle are late entries in the history of Middle English religious drama—perhaps even products of a time when, as the later Banns (extant manuscripts 1600-1609) indicate, the plays’ civic sponsors hoped to align their popular performance text with Protestant sensibilities. Ascribing the authorship of the cycle (without support) to the fourteenth-century monk Ranulph Higden, these Banns describe Higden as a proto-Reformer who, responding to the fact that "These storyes of the testamente at this tyme... in a common Englishe tonge never reade nor harde," was "nothinge affrayde"

with fear of borninge, hangeinge, or cuttinge of heade
to sett out that all maye deserne and see,
and parte of good belefe, beleve ye mee. (22-26)³

The Chester cycle is thus characterized as a prophetic vehicle for the reformed religion, working to bring the message of the Bible directly to the lay population. As David Mills notes, portraying the cycle "as inspired by Protestant evangelizing zeal rather than a Catholic sacramental concern was an ingenious attempt" to ensure its survival (Chester xviii), yet the late Banns demonstrate that the plan for preservation extended beyond claiming Higden as author. In fact, much
of the defense of the cycle focuses on the role of the audience, on the responsibility of current Christians for recognizing the true meaning of the plays. Contemporary audiences of the cycle are called upon to distinguish themselves, their comprehension of, and their responses to the plays from an earlier time of religious darkness and "ignorance":

As all that shall see them [the plays] shall moste welcome bee,  
so all that doe heare them we moste humblye praye  
not to compare this matter or storye  
with the age or tyme wherein we presentlye staye—  
but to the tyme of ignorance whearin we doe [did] straye.  

(285-95)⁶

Encouraged to recognize a spiritual perspective and accompanying viewing abilities as superior to those of previous audiences—"better men and finer heads now come" (205)—contemporary witnesses to the plays are acknowledged as beneficiaries of a more enlightened age, and are entreated to approach the plays with a different and more informed understanding, underwritten by the clarifying power of the reformed faith.⁷

At the same time, rather than eliminating elements of the plays which adherents of the true faith might find objectionable, the late Banns draw upon this more enlightened perspective, enabled by that faith, in order to account for those aspects of the cycle that lack scriptural authorization. "[T]hinges not warranted by anye wrytte" are described as "[i]nterminglinge therewithe onely to make sporte ... (11-12) and are portrayed as harmless remnants of the old faith, with the result that engaging and theologically suspect throwbacks to the outdated faith such as the shepherds’ feasting and wrestling (96-102), the Harrowing of Hell (146-52), and the midwives at the Nativity (89-95) remain intact in the current performance, ostensibly for comic and/or antiquarian effect. Thus assisting the survival of a text and performance that would ordinarily have troubled Protestant adherents, the Banns cleverly divert attention and theological responsibility from the cycle itself to those who choose to view it. Whereas past audiences were unable to see the beliefs that inspired the cycle, contemporary audiences are capable of recognizing the true religious
allegiance of the plays, as, for example, in the reference to the older faith’s misconception of Eucharist doctrine that accompanies the description of the pageant dedicated to Christ’s trial and flagellation:

Yow Fletchares, Boyeres, Cowpers, Stringers, and Imemongers, see soberlye ye make oute Cristes dolefull deathe:
his scourginge, his shippinge, his bludshed and passion,
and all the paynes he suffred till the laste of his breathe.
Lordinges, in this storye consistethe our chefe faiithe,
The ignorance wherein hathe us manye yeares soe blinded
as though now all see the pathe playne . . . . (138-44)

Applying the Reformation emphasis on the responsibility of individual Christians to read and interpret the Bible for themselves to audiences of the Chester plays, the authors of the late Banns work to place the cycle firmly within the auspices of the new faith, while simultaneously crafting a situation—based upon the responsibility of the audience to view the plays properly—that allows for the preservation of textual and performance elements associated with the older faith. Placing much of the responsibility for constructing the meaning of that text upon the audience, the late Banns seem therefore to allow for potentially divergent reception styles within the same performance text. The theological revisions and recharacterization that late sixteenth-century performances of the Chester cycle likely required perhaps responded partly to the strength and popularity of the vernacular religious drama, and to the role its reception style expected of its audiences. The different reception styles necessitated by the staging of a Catholic play in a Protestant context, then, suggest that shifting religious ideologies in Reformation England may have included the development of a communication and reception aesthetic which Reformers sought to distinguish from that of the earlier faith—even as, in order to shape and reconcile that aesthetic, they drew upon the texts, worship practices, and performance styles of the faith which they condemned.

Articulating Response

If, as reader response critics have argued, it is the reader or audience that is chiefly responsible for constructing the meaning of a text, then the divergent reception styles that the late Banns subtly as-
cribe to the Chester cycle may provide an avenue for understanding the different meanings and uses audiences—influenced by their theological leanings—might assign to a performance text. Departing from the majority of reader response criticism in his belief that the experiences of readers and audiences can be understood and realized, Hans Robert Jauss, in constructing his theory of Rezeptionsästhetik or “reception aesthetics,” argues that examining a work’s shifting history of reception can reveal rather than obscure those experiences:

the horizon of expectations of a work allows one to determine its artistic character by the kind and the degree of its influence on a presupposed audience. If one characterizes as aesthetic distance the disparity between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception can result in a “change of horizons” through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness, then this aesthetic distance can be objectified historically along the spectrum of the audience’s reactions and criticism’s judgment. (25)

In its attempt to reshape theologically the meaning and message of the Chester cycle, the late Banns appear to participate in such a “change of horizons”: in order to characterize an ostensibly Catholic text as, really, a Protestant one in disguise, the Banns rely upon audience response, articulating an experience for reformed viewers that differs from, but also reveals, the experiences of earlier viewers.

Importantly, the late performance history of the cycle also intimates a strong context for the articulation of shifting reception aesthetics. Given that the last two performances of the Chester cycle occurred in 1572 and 1575, each under the auspices of a Protestant mayor, attention to the objectionable experiences of past audiences may have been especially keen. While the 1572 staging proceeded, it did so only “against ye willes of ye Bishops of Canterbury [,] York and Chester” (REED 96). This conflict, along with the attempt of the Archbishop to halt the performance through “an Inhibition” which “Came too late” (97), suggests that the plays engaged doctrinal controversies. Yet, given the emphasis on distinguishing audi-
ence roles and experiences in the late Banns, the staging of the cycle may have also involved objections to a performance and attendant reception style still engaged by the cycle and linked to the old faith. Although doctrinal changes no doubt accounted for many of the modifications required by Chester’s alderman prior to the 1575 performance, authorities may have been concerned with performance technique and appropriate audience response as well. The files of the assembly that detail the proceedings of Chester council meetings note that in 1575 it was “agreed” that the cycle “shall be set forth in the best fashion with such reformacion as mr maior with his advice shall think meet and convenient,” while the official record of the council contained in the Assembly Book detailing the council events of the same date asserts that the plays “shall be set forth and played in such orderly manner and sorte as the same haue ben Accostomed with such correction and amendement as shalbe thought Convenient by the said Maior” (104). Yet, the fact that both John Hanky (mayor in 1572) and Sir John Savage (1575) were called before the Privy Council regarding their role in promoting the respective stagings (109-10, 113-17) demonstrates that any changes that were made were likely found insufficient. Perhaps, as the preservation attempts of the late Banns seem to indicate, the content of the plays was less at issue than the style of production. At the very least, the late performance dates of the cycle attest to its ongoing popularity and to the desire, as also illustrated in the late Banns, to maintain at least some of the plays’ original (if theologically suspect) elements while attempting to reposition the text to suit Protestant sensibilities. The sentiments expressed in the Banns may thus reflect the desires and methods of those who wished to preserve the cycle and continue its performances in the late sixteenth century through an emphasis on the role of the audience.

Audience Response

As Mills, Peter Travis, Martin Stevens, and others have remarked, the Chester cycle, in fact, maintains an ongoing awareness of its audience (“Staging” 10-13; “Affective Criticism,” Dramatic Design; Four 266-70). Throughout the cycle, the audience’s role is highlighted: they aid in the progression of scenes; they participate in transforming present-day Chester into locations from sacred history;
they confirm doctrine and help to enable the communication of sacramental meaning; and, as the late Banns also reflect, they readily accept a mixing of comic elements with religious topics. More fundamentally, the audience is addressed by a number of figures who provoke them to participate actively and communally in the action and meaning of the scenes enacted both before them and, often, in their midst. The most consistent of these figures in the Chester cycle is Nuntius, a messenger who appears in a number of plays. When, for example, Nuntius closes the pageant of Noah's Flood in anticipation of the following play, he does so with reference to the audience's physical presence and imminent contact with the events concluded and those about to unfold:

All peace, lordinges that bine presente
and herken mee with good intente,
howe Noe awaye from us hee went
and all his companye;
and Abraham through Godes grace,
he is commen into this place,
and yee will geeve us rowme and space
to tell yow thyss storye. (Chester III.1-8) 

Encouraging a temporal as well as spatial continuity, Nuntius acknowledges the presence of the audience, and his invocation to those "that bine presente" is inclusive; his declaration makes clear that this audience is implicated in the process by which past events are re-created and re-experienced. 

The Chester cycle, however, also contains another principal audience-address figure who posits a style of reception that differs from the experience in which Nuntius engages his audience. Appearing as a readerly guide figure for the audience of the play, a character designated as "Expositor" also makes significant, if limited, appearances throughout the cycle. In contrast to the communally participatory experience Nuntius expects of characters, actors, and audience, Expositor adopts an interpretive stance. While, for instance, in announcing the pageant that contains the episode of Balaak and Balaam, Nuntius again constructs a physical closeness among audience, performers, and the events to come—"Make rowme, lordinges, and give us
way, / and lett Balack come in and playe” (IV.484-85)\textsuperscript{14}—Expositor, in contrast, entreats his audience to a more direct interpretation of the episode. This interpretation, rather than emphasizing audience participation, privileges clear and immediate understanding:

\begin{quote}
Lordinges, what may this signifye
I will expound it appertly
the [that] unlearned standinge herebye
maye knowe what this may bee.
This present, I saye veramente,
signifieth the new testamente
that nowe is used with good intente
throughout all Christianitye. (113-20)
\end{quote}

Differing substantially from Nuntius as well as Chester’s other audience-attentive figures, Expositor articulates a reception style for his audience that appears more self-conscious in its deliberate attention to expose and deliver clearly (“appertly”) the meaning of the theological texts and events enacted before them.\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, in pointing to how the New Testament “nowe is used with good intente,” Expositor seems to echo the sentiments of the late Banns regarding the superior comprehension abilities of contemporary, reformed Christians—all those who “now ... see the pathe playne” (144). Similarly, in the pageant of the Prophets of Antichrist, Expositor offers a “plain” interpretation of Zacharias’ prophecy while calling upon his audience to respond appropriately:

\begin{quote}
Nowe for to moralyze aright
which this prophett sawe in sight,
I shall found through my might
to you in mecke manner,
and declare that soone in height
more playnlye, as I have teight.
Lystens nowe with hartes light
this lesson for to learne. (73-80)
\end{quote}

Apparently more concerned with his audience’s reception role and with their ability to understand the meaning of what the play brings to them, Expositor seems to look forward to the emphasis of the late
Banns on audience responsibility in uncovering the true meaning and value of text and performance. As William Tyndale, whose complete works were republished in 1573 (one year after the youngest of the extant manuscripts of the Chester cycle), entreated his readers: “Cleave unto the text and plain storye and endeavour thyself to search out the meaning of all that is described therein” (“A Prologue” 411). More specifically, Tyndale emphasized the importance of appropriate perception; the proper interpretive approach remains an important theme throughout his writings. Explaining, for example, that it is Christ’s blood that enables right thinking, Tyndale declares the need to “have eyes of God to see the right meaning of the text” and claims that “except a man cast away his own imagination and reason, he cannot perceive God” and (“A Pathway” 18; “Obedience” 310; “A Pathway” 16). Expositor’s appearance in the text may thus occasion the kind of “shifting of horizons” that Jauss describes in his attention to revealing divergent aesthetics of reception. When Expositor appears, the audience is called upon to approach the plays differently, to view them as opportunities for uncovering sacred truths through attentive interpretation rather than participatory engagement. Expositor may therefore serve as a model for the proper approach to the plays which will, as the late Banns insist, reveal how the plays really align with Protestant thought.

Given Expositor’s divergent style, is it therefore possible that he was a conscious Reformation addition, perhaps intended to convince authorities Protestant potential of the cycle in order to preserve it? Would this attempt, ironically, also have guaranteed the survival of much of its earlier character and reception style? The late Banns seem to detail such a process, and Expositor’s attitude toward text, performance, and audience seem poised to convince a theologically suspicious viewer that the cycle has a religious merit that supersedes its connections to the older faith. Perhaps the revisions required by authorities before the last performance of the cycle in 1575 encouraged the addition of the Expositor figure who, despite his impressively distinctive demeanor, may necessarily have been somewhat limited in his theologically transformative impact. He appears, ultimately, in only five pageants, a fact that may account in part for the continued objections to the 1575 performance, even after apparent changes had been made (REED 104, 109-10, 113-17).
Certainly, there is no definitive way of knowing when Expositor may have been added to the cycle. As scholars of the play well know, the figure was likely added to the text along with interpolated sections from the Stanzaic Life of Christ, itself a text with strong Chester connections whose date and manner of compilation nevertheless remain unclear. Moreover, despite Peter Travis' contention that the Stanzaic and related Expositor additions likely correspond with the moving of the cycle's performance from Corpus Christi Day to Whitsuntide in the 1520s or 1530s (Dramatic Design 44-61), David Mills has asserted that that "[n]either the date" of the "composition" of the Stanzaic "nor the date and circumstances of the incorporation of its material into the cycle can be determined" ("Chester" 114). Given the rather didactic and moralistic character of the Stanzaic, a feature of the text that (as critics have noted) provides a sometimes startlingly contrast to the engaging style of the Chester drama (Mills, "Chester" 114; E. Salter 96), perhaps advocates of the cycle seized an opportunity to incorporate a text that, while sounding old, might likewise, and prophetically, appeal to Reform thought. This strategy would concur with the Banns' proto-Protestant characterization of both the Chester cycle and the author claimed for it, Ranulph Higden. Indeed, as the Stanzaic itself was compiled, in large part, from Hidgen's Polychronicon, naming Higden as author hints at another, more concrete, connection between the Stanzaic and the Banns' defense of the cycle. Even if Travis is right in associating the Stanzaic revision with the shift in the play's performance to Whitsuntide, the move away from medieval Catholicism's premier religious observance, the feast of Corpus Christi, seems to provide the appropriate context for a revision that might seek to transform the cycle into a performance text appropriate for the new faith's emphasis on individual authority and scriptural access. Perhaps a test case for changing the means by which sacred topics are communicated to and received by an audience, the Chester cycle, as an essentially medieval and Catholic play still in active production in the early modern period, thus emerges as a pivotal text for voicing the shifting ideologies of spirituality, worship, language, text, and authority which accompanied the widespread change instigated by the religious reformers of the period.
Revealing Response
Perhaps the result of a limited attempt to convince doctrinally attentive authorities that the Chester cycle was redeemable and even valuable to the goals of the reformed religion, Expositor demonstrates a reception aesthetic that differs markedly from much of the cycle's emphasis on communal audience participation. In calling upon his apparently more informed (and reformed) viewers as fellow seekers of scriptural truth, as self-consciously attentive readers of texts brought to life for the edification of all Christians, Expositor models an experience of the play and a form of response that boldly contrasts Nuntius, whose audience addresses seek to include audience members in the action of individual scenes, creating an almost festive atemporality that blends sacred history with present-day Christians. Yet, more than merely contrasting this alternative style of performance, response, and worship, Expositor may also have helped to articulate it both for early modern Christians who, perhaps despite their Protestant allegiances (as in the late Banns) wished to preserve it, and for Reformers who, in their desire to forge a reception style more attuned to Protestant theology, also necessarily sought to characterize the belief practices of the earlier faith. As described by Paul White, in the minds of many early Reformers, ideas and "images" associated with Catholicism "need[ed] to be presented in order to be literally or ritualistically destroyed" so playwrights such as John Bale often "use[d] an image to make a point about the abuse of images" (15;2). Such a process is reminiscent of Jauss' claim that shifts in a work's "horizon of expectations" may be revealed "through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness" (26).
Moreover, as I have worked to demonstrate, the audience-attentive figures of the drama emerge as a particularly valuable means for demonstrating this process. For although the audience-address figure deals chiefly with processes of communication and response, he also, by his very nature as a mediating figure, discounts no perspective of history. He, as well as the drama in which he operates, reveals the struggles between all voices of culture: ideology is consistently invoked, tested, and rewritten within the working space of the dramatic performance.19 Spanning the different regions of past and present, sacred and mundane, the audience-address figure brings
about meaning even as he discloses the changing dynamics of how it can be displayed and understood. In many ways, he resembles the translator in the late Middle Ages, the figure upon whom Michel de Certeau has interestingly seized upon as an aid to understanding his own study of shifting aesthetics and "ways of speaking": "Like the ethnologist," de Certeau says, the translator presented a foreign region, even though he did so to give an adaptation of it by allowing it to disturb his own native language. He produced otherness, but within a field that didn't belong to him any more than that other language did, a field in which he had no right of authorship. He produced, but without any place of his own, in that no-man's land, on that meeting of the waters where the waves of language roll back upon themselves . . . . The translator [was] caught up in the other's language and creating possibility, by means of it while at the same time losing himself in the crowd. (119)

The audience-address figure, then, remains a very fluid character, at work in a kind of "no-man's land" that is the dramatic performance, experiencing and divulging the passages of ideology and culture that reverberate in those instances of enactment, on the borders of, yet centrally located in, the struggles of a society to understand itself in relation to the divine.

Thus the attempt demonstrated in the late Banns both to preserve much of the original character of the Chester cycle and to associate it with Protestant thinking may also demonstrate a tendency in the early modern period to probe the remnants of the old faith, if only to set about tearing them down--a tendency that may, thankfully, have allowed for the survival of texts which might otherwise have been, as were so many others, destroyed. While Expositor may not participate directly in this destructive process, he does, given the distinctiveness of his approach to text, performance, and audience within the Chester cycle, help to articulate a reception aesthetic that, once revealed, may have encouraged Reformers such as Bale and Tyndale to characterize much of the older faith's worship practices as mere entertainments, indulging human senses and desires rather than the truth and clarity of God's Word. In Bale's accounting, for example,
"In the place of Christe [they] have set up supersticyons; / For preachynges, ceremonyes, for Gods wurde, mennys tradicyons" ("King. Johan" 76). Similarly, Tyndale termed the practices of the old faith "persuasions of worldly wisdom," "blind ceremonyes [and] superstitiousness of disguised hypocrisy," and claimed that its beliefs encouraged "the people [to] think that they have done abundantly enough for God . . . if they be present once in a day at such mumming" ("Obedience" 220; 226-27). Viewed as an aid to a textual interpolation process, as an insertion into a performance that likely reflected a long-standing religious tradition of audience reception, Expositor imposes one style of response that helps to disclose another, perhaps clarifying what Bale and Tyndale were working to define and describe when they critiqued the methods and practices of the "popish" faith.

Response Alternatives

Chester's fifth pageant (dedicated to Moses and the Law and to Balaak and Balaam) offers a particularly strong example of how Expositor's distinctive treatment of text, performance, and audience might bring "to the level of consciousness" a complex tradition of worship practices and religious theater likely not voiced or articulated until the Reformation. In addition to Expositor in this pageant, several other figures address the audience; yet, unlike Expositor, these other figures identify the audience as "Godes folke of Israel," making them participants and co-producers in the re-creation of sacred events. Before Expositor's first speech in the play, Deus and Moses, namely, each have speeches in which they invoke the present audience, partaking of the same continuum engaged by Nuntius in the previous pageant. Opening the play, Deus—with a seemingly overt reference to the audience—casts them as physical and temporary contemporaries: "Moyses, my servant leeffe and dere, / and all my people that bine here .... " (Chester V.1-2).

Moses, too, includes the audience directly in the scene when, following Deus's lead, he begins his speech "Good folke, dread yee nought." Even the stage directions that precede this speech note that "Tunc Moyses in monte dicat populo" (sd. ff. V, 32) and the audience become those people, direct recipients of Moses' message.

In describing what she saw as indicative of the typical experience of a medieval audience, Anne Righter long ago pointed specifically to this Chester pageant:
There is much to be said for the subtlety of a theatre in which Moses can enjoin obedience to the commandments of God upon an audience of Israelites who lived before the birth of Christ and, at the same time, with all the force and directness of the original incident, upon medieval people who, at the conclusion of a day of pageants and processions, will make their way home through the streets of an English town.\textsuperscript{21}

Revealing a principal concern with establishing and maintaining a coalescence between the sacred events portrayed and the lives of the audience assembled at performance time, this style of performance and worship requires that participants contribute to this coalescence, drawing upon a view of history for which David Jeffrey provides historical and religious precedent:

The view of history as an artificial frame for the recurrence of divine pattern had been common to several centuries of European culture . . . . This view saw men of every generation participating in one great historia—in the speculum humanae salvationis. In this view nothing happens for the first time . . . . The theme is recurrence. Christ lives and dies and is born again daily in the sacrament and in the hearts of men. There is no "pretense" as such even in a crucifixion play, for the actor, like his audience, is participating in a divine pattern . . . . [T]hey try to come to grips in a powerful way with what it means to be crucified with Christ. ("English" 72)\textsuperscript{22}

Illustrating this idea of "recurrence" in portraying sacred history, actors and audiences attempt a temporal and spatial continuum between re-created past and performative present. As with other examples of Middle English religious drama, the Chester cycle contains figures who can facilitate and maintain this continuum, linking past events with present meaning, connecting sacred deeds with mundane experience, and engaging all participants in the "one great historia" of the "speculum humanae salvationis."\textsuperscript{23}

Yet the Chester cycle also reveals how an audience-attentive figure can present to his audience an alternative style of reception, a style meant to participate in a shifting perspective on the proper use
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of religious texts and an emphasis on the interpretive responsibility of the individual Christian. Such a shifting perspective may be detected in a 1539 royal proclamation that focuses on the “right use” of religious ceremonies:

[C]eremonies should be observed and used in their right use (all ignorance and superstition clearly taken away) . . . that in such places, and all such days as the said ceremonies shall be chiefly celebrated, the bishop, dean, curate, or parish priest, for that time the minister, shall truly and plainly instruct the people [in] the good and right use and effects of such ceremony as is used that day, by which knowledge the people so using and observing the same ceremony may be fruitfully edified in . . . godly thoughts of such things as those ceremonies, well understood, were ordained to preach unto us. (Hughes and Larkin 278)

While a number of the proclamations concerning religious issues respond to disruptions caused by overly zealous religious reformers, others demonstrate a desire to curb the influence of the older faith’s traditions and worship practices. 24 Attentive to the means by which meaning is made and communicated, as well as to the appropriate role of the Christian worshipper, the 1539 proclamation, a document nearly contemporary with the moving of the Chester cycle from Corpus Christi Day to Whitsuntide, suggests a shift in the reception aesthetics of religious ceremony and belief practice with which the cycle, its sponsors, audiences, and critics may have been grappling throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeen centuries. Similarly, as demonstrated by his treatment of audience and performance in Chester’s fifth pageant, Expositor reveals fundamental differences between what the old and new faiths expected from their followers in terms of belief and worship practices. Offering an alternative process of response, Expositor not only appears to interrupt the participatory atmosphere created by Deus and Moses for the audience—he allows Moses only a single eight-line stanza (Chester V.33-40)—he also draws attention to the kind of reception experience in which the audience has been suspended. 25 As Jauss contends, an emphasis on the process of the drama itself, based as it is on the dialogic work of
communication and reception, reveals the true nature of a past literary and historical creation: "[t]he work lives to the extent that it has influence. Included within the influence of a work is that which is accomplished in the consumption of the work as well as in the work itself. That which happens with the work is an expression of what the work is . . . . The work is a work and lives as a work for the reason that it 
\textit{demands} an interpretation and 'works' [influences, \textit{wirkt}] in many meanings" (15).\textsuperscript{26} Expositor measures and interprets an earlier process of consumption and "work" and posits a different process, and we, in turn, measure his attempted "work" of the text as a way to uncover its "many meanings." Perhaps responding to the passage of time and the strengthening of Protestant religious ideology, the latest manuscript version of the Chester cycle, the H manuscript (Harley 2124), increases Expositor's appearances in the play, while decreasing those of Nuntius. If we assume that the H manuscript was a presentation copy and not intended for performance (all of the extant complete manuscripts, of course, postdate Chester's last production\textsuperscript{27}), we can perhaps detect a more extensive attempt in this latest version of the cycle to represent a style of reception more acceptable to Protestant thought than the one associated with the religious drama of the old faith.

\textbf{Historicizing Response}

Revealing a changing view of the reception process and what should be accomplished by that process, Expositor, in the first lines he speaks in pageant five, disregards the apparent atemporality of the Deus-Moses scene and treats it as an event from the past: "Lordings, this commandement / was the first lawe that ever God sent" (Chester V, 41-42). Presenting an alternative view of time and history, one that differs from the inclusive stance that figures such as Deus and Moses assume for their audience, Expositor locates the scene in history and makes it an object of study. Communicating an alternative to, in Stanley Fish's terms, the current "system of intelligibility" (524-33) in the play--the process by which meaning is made and communicated. Yet Expositor also necessarily draws attention to that current "system"; likening the play and its subject to a written text— he insists that "wee reden of this storye"(Chester V.48)—he seemingly diminishes the performative and active quality of the play. His
treatment of audience and performance seem in fact to reflect what Jeffrey describes as the new faith's changing view of history and its "rising opposition" in the early years of the Reformation to an "open-ended" view of biblical history. "This criticism, Jeffrey notes, "would come particularly from those new churchmen whose use of the Scriptures was based upon a reverence for literal historical accuracy"("English" 47). Expositor's assertions, coupled with his swift rendering of the scenes to the past, require the audience to think in linear terms, establishing an atmosphere that differs from the "view of history as an artificial frame for the recurrence of divine pattern"(72). Treating events from sacred history as events firmly located in a time and place different from those of the present audience, Expositor seeks, instead, to extract meaning, truth, and usefulness, rather than to bring his audience to that meaning through their joint "participat[ion] in a divine pattern" (72).

These different perspectives on time, sacred history, and reception roles continue to emerge in Chester's fifth pageant. When Balaak enters, apparently at the level of the audience, declaring his identity and describing his power and greatness, his speech is punctuated with three stage directions—"Florish," "Caste up," and "Sworde"(sds. ff. Chester V. 111, 115, 143). Physically vigorous actions, the directions amplify the intended immediacy of his entrance as he makes his way through the crowd, who themselves are playing the role, designated by Moses, as "Godes folke of Israel." Quite possibly, then, Balaak "flourishes" and "casts up" directly at the audience, since in his tirade against Moses and the Israelites he orders one of his knights to go "fetche" Balaam "that he may curse these people heare" (V. 165-66, my emphasis). As with Nuntius' physical interactions with the audience in Chester's fourth pageant, Balaak here assumes and maintains a physical and spatial immediacy with the audience, subjecting them to his tirades. The present and personal history of the audience mingle with that of a sacred history whose meaning and significance are enabled through audience participation. Yet, in a move that diverges from, and therefore helps to articulate more fully, the participatory atmosphere that has dominated much of the pageant, Balaam's curse, noticeably, is not re-enacted. Instead, it is described to the audience by Expositor, who instigates a devotional experience different from the interactive flour-
ishings of Balaak. In fact, in the Harley manuscript version of the cy­
cle, in which Expositor’s appearances are more frequent, Balaak’s
dynamic sword play does not appear (neither does Nuntius). In all
manuscripts, moreover, Expositor asserts his audience’s position as
viewers—“Lorde and ladys thare bine lente” (388)—while de­
scribing the Israelites as a distant people located in the distant past,
historical persons whose story is communicated to the audience in a
style that requires a devotional response that likely diverges from that
previously required of them:

and to Godes people hee hath them brought--
God knoweth, a perilouse thinge.

For when they had of them a sight,
manye of them agaynste right
gave themselue with all theyre might
those women for to please.
And then soone to them they went;
to have theyre [love] was there intent,
desyringe those women of theyr consent
and soo to live in pease. (394-403, my emphasis)

Referring to “all saints whose lives thou readest in the scriptures,” as
well as other figures from biblical history, Tyndale urged “all that
are present and gone before are but ensamples, to strength our faith
and trust in the word of God” (“Parable” 110), an approach that Ex­
positor also seems to expect of his audience. While not all of the
third-person plural pronouns in his description refer to the Israelites,
the repetition emphatically stresses “Godes people”—originally
identified so closely with the audience throughout much of the previ­
ous play—as examples from the past for understanding and revela­
tion. In fact, in the Harley manuscript this process of exemplification
and revelation is expanded through the addition of a procession of
prophets to the end of the pageant which includes intervening expla­
nations from Expositor. Otherwise engaging figures who step into
the time and place of the contemporary audience to impart informa­
tion to a contemporary congregation, become, once interpreted by
Expositor, the conveyers of sacred utterances from the past whose
words now require explanation. 31

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Participatory Response

Despite (and, in part, because of) Expositor's distinctive presence in the Chester cycle, the style of performance and reception engaged by Nuntius and other figures like him remains intriguingly intact—a convention that seems strongly bound to pre-Reformation notions of time, history, and worship practice. Invoking again a temporal and spatial proximity between audience members and figures from sacred history, Nuntius at the beginning of Chester's sixth pageant (the Annunciation and the Nativity) requests that the audience:

Make rowme, lordinges, and give us waye
and lett Octavian come and playe,
and Sybell the sage, that well fayre maye,
to tell you of prophecy. (177-80)

In contrast to Expositor's insistence on immediate interpretation and understanding for his audience, Nuntius's declaration is a necessary and immediate address to a contemporary crowd, an acknowledgement of their commanding presence as both past and present participants. In addition, the duality of performance space and medieval audience echoes the messenger's double identity: his role as both Nuntius, audience-address figure, and Preco, Octavian's messenger, contributes to a conflation of time and space that enables the recreation of sacred history.32

The conflation of past and present people, time, and space similarly informs the response of one of the pageant's Angels to the expectant Mary—a response that also provides a particularly descriptive example of the style of reception this conflation engages. Seeking to explain the significance of Mary's journey to Bethlehem with Joseph (to pay the tax), the Angel includes a convincing reference to the contemporary audience, providing another example of Jeffrey's "recurrence history":

Marye, Godes mothere dere,
the tokeninge I shall thee lere.
The commen people, as thos seest here,
are glad—as they well maye—
that they shall see of Abrahams seede
Christe come to helpe them in there neede. (Chester VI.437-42)33
Cast in an interesting dual role, the audience must see themselves as contemporaries both to Mary and the virgin birth, as well as to the performance of the current play. In fact, the two situations neatly connect in the Angel’s smooth reckoning, and Mary herself is implicated as the past, present, and eternal mother of God. “Christe come to helpe them in there neede” transcends his original birth; he is humankind’s salvation then, now, and always. The timelessness is constructed and celebrated in an inclusive and participatory process based on a view that sees “history as an artificial frame for the recurrence of divine pattern” and “men of every generation [as participants] in one great historia—in the speculum humanae salvationis” (Jeffrey, “English” 72). The Angel in Chester’s sixth pageant explains to Mary the purpose of Mary and Joseph’s journey, conveying information and meaning to the audience, not as outside viewers of history—a stance modeled, in part, by Expositor—but through their inclusiveness and participation in the sacred scenes. The journey, as the Angel explains it, actually motivates the communication continuum between the past event of the Nativity and the present day audience. As demonstrated by the Angel’s explanation to Mary, the synchronic nature of the performative process involves the forward-looking perspective of figures from the sacred past as well as the backward-looking contemplation of the participants from the contemporary play. The actions of Mary and Joseph as they occurred, and now occur, are always and ever meant to convey meaning and significance to those who work to re-create them.

Similarly, in pageant XII of the Chester cycle (The Temptation), the character of Diabolus creates a unique connection with the contemporary audience, ascribing his reasons for his temptation of Christ to emotions that could be shared by many audience members. The Devil opens the play with a speech of more than fifty lines delivered in soliloquy, explaining and describing his reasons for the temptation. Declaring his wonder and amazement at the nearly unbelievable state and attributes of the God-become-man, the Devil implicates the attendant audience. He asks, “What maister mon ever be this / that nowe in world commen is?”(9-10), engaging the audience’s own questions and curiosity, their own “mervayle” (21) about Jesus. In offering his perspective to the audience, the Devil makes them his cohorts, informants who will understand and follow the reasoning.
behind his plan for the temptation. Indeed, once the actual temptation begins, Diabolus, while he speaks directly to Christ, also maintains an ongoing commentary upon his and Christ's actions, keeping the audience informed by consistently referring to Christ in the third person, even though Christ is present before him and the audience:

Owt, alas! What is this?
This matter fares all amysse;
hongree I see wel hee is,
as man should kindlye.
But through no craft ne no contyse
I cannot torne his will, iwyys;
that neede of any bodely blys
in him nothinge hasse hee.

For hee may suffer all maner of noye
as man should, well and stifflye;
but aye hee winneth the victorye
as godhead in him weare.
Some other sleight I mott espye
this disobedient for to destroye;
for of mee hee hasse the maistrie
unhappeningely nowe here. (81-96, my emphasis)

Whereas in other circumstances the participatory aesthetic has often been most perceptively identifiable through the physical and spatial continuum assumed by its mediating figures, here the Devil establishes an emotional and intellectual continuum, engaging the audience's feelings of curiosity and wonder about Christ's nature and his own diabolical reasons for the temptation. This emotional and intellectual continuum extends the temporal and spatial continuum (of which Christ "hasse the maistrie / unhappeningely nowe here"), so that Diabolus can suggest that the curiosity and wonder behind his temptation has actually resurfaced in the minds of the contemporary audience. Just as they are implicated by him in the temptation process, so too are audience members implicated by their own inevitable questioning of God's nature both within and without the play. From within the process of the dramatic performance, audience engage-
interpretive response
expositor, however, asserts a different method of deriving meaning in chester's twelfth pageant, one which, again, presents the audience with a different experience of the enacted scene. exhibiting an alternative reception style, expositor interprets the meaning of the temptation of christ as a comment on the three sins of gluttony, vainglory, and pride (xii.169ff). he relegates the scene to the past, treating its significance as that which must be understood and explained from a distance:

this overcome thrise in this case
the devill, as playd was in this place,
of the three sinnes that adam was
of wayle into woe weaved.
but adam fell through his trespas,
and jhesu withstoode him through his grace;
for of his godhead soothnes
that tyme was cleane disceived. (209-16)

whereas in the temptation scene, meaning is communicated through a style of reception that engages the present, active feelings of audience members, for expositor the episode requires a clearer, more direct statement of understanding.

the importance of expositor's particular approach to events from sacred history presented by the play becomes clearer in his reference to the performance of the woman taken in adultery, also staged in chester's twelfth pageant:

nowe lorde, i pray you marke here
the great goodnes of godes deede.
i will declare as hit is neede
these thinges that playd were. (281-84, my emphasis)\textsuperscript{37}

the play may provide the audience access to these events—in the late banns, higden is applauded for bringing "[t]hese storyes of the
testamente at this tyme . . . / in a common Englishe tonge never reade nor harde” to the people, “thereof in these pagiantes to make open showe” (21-3)—but this access must also include an even more direct understanding of the text, perhaps similar to what Tyndale intended when he enjoined his readers to “Cleve unto the text and playne storye” (“A Prologue” 411). Similarly, in the Prophets of Antichrist (pageant XXII, in which Expositor makes his last appearance in the cycle), despite each prophet’s explanation of his respective vision, Expositor contributes yet another layer of interpretation, stressing the need for an even clearer understanding. Despite Ezechiel’s assertion—

This sawe I right in my sight
to knowe that he was God almight
that heaven and yearth should deale and dight
and never shall ended bee (21-24)—

Expositor continues the revelatory process, emphasizing the need for the audience to “expresselye knowe”:

Nowe that you shall expresselye knowe
these prophettes wordes upon a rowe,
what the doe signifie I will shewe
that mych may doe you good. (25-28)

Similarly, after Zechariah’s address, the explanation and meaning which the prophet communicates is simply not sufficient:

Nowe for to moralyze aright
which this prophet sawe in sight,
I shall found through my might
to you in meeke mannere
and declare that soone in height
more playnle, as I have teight. (73-78)

Perhaps reminiscent of Tyndale’s assertion that “a prophet signifieth him that interpreth the hard places of scripture, as him that prophe-sieth things to come,” (“Parable” 80), Expositor demonstrates an ap-
parent need to make further sense for the audience of a past that needs clear, careful, and "plain" interpretation. A similar insistence is communicated in the late Banns, where the victory of sight, assisted "now [by] the path playne," works to overcome "[t]he ignorance wherein hathe us manye yeares soe blinded" (143-44). Privileging explicative discourse, Expositor’s addresses may, in fact, resemble a Protestant sermonizing whose goals and methods—focused on explanation, clarity, and the revelation of previous misuses of religious ritual—are outlined, for example, in a 1538 royal proclamation:

Great and manifold superstitions and abuses . . . have crept into the hearts and stomachs of many of his [the King’s] true, simple, and unlearned loving subjects for lack of the sincere and true explication, and the declaring of the true meaning and understanding of Holy Scripture, sacramentals, rites and ceremonies, as also the sundry strifes and contentions which have and may grow among many of his said loving subjects for lack of the very perfect knowledge of the true intent and meaning of the same, hath divers times most straightly commanded all and singular his archbishops, bishops, and other ministers of the clergy of this his most noble realm, in their sermons and preachings, plainly, purely, sincerely, and with all their possible diligence, to set forth first the glory of God and truth of his most blessed word, and after, the true meaning and end of the said sacramentals and ceremonies, to the intent that, all superstitious abuses and idolatries being avoided, the same sacramentals, rites, and ceremonies might be quietly used. (Hughes and Larkin 274-75)

Appearing to embody the requirements decreed for religious authorities, that "plainly, purely, sincerely, and with all their possible diligence, [they] set forth first the glory of God and truth of his most blessed word, and after, the true meaning and end of the said sacramentals and ceremonies," Expositor reflects the growing emergence of a reception style fashioned to reveal the failings of the past religion as well as to sustain the true faith and its deliverance of God’s Word. At the same time, as noted in the proclamation, that reception style likely depended upon a shifting ideology of response for
audiences and worshippers: the hope that “sacramentals, rites, and ceremonies might be quietly used,” is also invoked in the concluding verse of the late Banns, which therefore end with a final emphasis on the role and responsibility of future audiences:

All that with quiett mynde
   can be contented to tarye
   be heere on Whitson-Mondaye;
   then begineth the storye. (210-13)

Conclusion

Distinguishable from the interactive aesthetic of communication and response espoused by the Chester cycle’s more audience-inclusive mediating figures, Expositor’s seemingly self-imposed liminality and emphasis on interpretive understanding suggest a shift in spiritual discourse that breaks with the communal ethos of devotion from which the vernacular religious theater likely emerged. Indeed, the very “unease about the immediacy and openness of drama itself,” which Mills has detected in the Chester cycle, as well as “the desire that audiences should be led to contemplate the action as a whole rather than identify with individuals within it closely” (Chester xxii), can perhaps be explained by a reformist attention to the text and to its revelation of a style of production and reception that likely troubled Protestant sensibilities. Believing that it was the improper use of sacred texts that mired the old faith in heresy, the overseers of the new faith often focused their attentions on distinguishing proper worship practice from such improper use. As Sir Richard Morison conceded in 1542 in “A Discourse Touching the Reformation of the Lawes of England,” “those plaies” associated with the old faith should be publicized because they “declare lyvely before the peoples eyes the abhomynation and wickedness of the bishop of Rome, monkes, freers, nonnes, and suche like ” (qtd. in Anglo 179). Given the late date of its manuscripts and of its last performances, the Chester cycle certainly seems a text that the forces of the Reformation were more at pains to modify and learn from than to destroy. Despite a Reformation dislike of the earlier faith’s disorderly devotional practices, then, we ultimately may have that religious upheaval to thank for the survival of those practices and the texts which
invoke them. The potentially reformist Expositor thus may disclose not only the guiding principles of his sponsors but also the aesthetic of the older faith—an aesthetic that necessitated for the new religion a reformulation of language, communication, and reception: in essence, the means by which one seeks the divine.

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Notes


2 See R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills' introduction to their edition of *The Chester Mystery Cycle, Vol. I: Text*, ix-xxvii, and Mills' essay, "The Chester Cycle." Indeed, the omission of a play of "the Assumption of Our Lady"—originally noted in the early Banns—from the late Banns and from the extant cycle versions suggests Reformation activity, placing the cycle in, at the earliest, the late sixteenth century.

3 All citations are from Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents*, pp. 285-95. All passages will henceforth be cited parenthetically by line number within the text.

4 In his "Epistle to the Reader," included at the end of his first version of the New Testament, William Tyndale expresses similar sentiments about the previously unprecedented use of the vernacular. He also asserts that in his text "many things are lacking which necessarily are required. Count it as a thing not having his full shape, but as it were born before his time, even as a thing begun rather than finished." In addition, his attention to a future version in which he will "seek in certain places more proper English, and with a table to expound the words which are not commonly used, and shew how the scripture useth many words which are otherwise understood of the common people, and to help with a declaration where one tongue taketh not another" (390) also seems echoed, to some extent, in the later Banns:

"condemne not oure matter where groose wordes you heare
which importe at this daye smale sence or understandinge—"
as sometymes "postie," bewyte, "in good manner," or "in feare"—
with such-like wilbe uttered in theare speaches speakeinge,
At this tyme those speches caried good lykinge;
those if at this tyme you take them spoken at that tyme--
as well matter as words—then all is well fyne. (49-55)

5 See also Mills’ brief discussion of the late Barns in Staging the Chester Plays, 5-7.

6 Mills translates “doe” as “did” in The Chester Mystery Cycle, 6.

7 Cf. Tyndale: “now the gospel all the world in as much as it crieth openly” (“A Pathway” 10).

8 For a discussion of manuscript dates and history, see Lumiansky’s and Mills’ introduction to The Chester Mystery Cycle Vol. I: Text and The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents, 1-86. Lumiansky and Mills argue for a single precursor document for all five manuscripts—the “Reginall”—maintained in Chester which underwent revision and editing over several decades (The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents 186-88); and see Mills, The Chester Mystery Cycle, xvi-xvii. Mills also argues that “by the late sixteenth century [the Reginall] was a record of repeated revision and selection, with words, phrases, long sections, and even whole plays, obscured, emended, or offered in alternative forms—in effect, ‘a cycle of cycles’” (“Chester” 111). See also the important work of Clopper in “History and Development.”

9 All citations are from Clopper, Records of Early English Drama: Chester (hereafter REED) and will henceforth be cited parenthetically by page number within the text.

10 As Eamon Duffy has asserted, we must guard “against underestimating the links between liturgical observance and the ‘secular’ celebratory and ludic dimensions of lay culture at the end of the Middle Ages” (22).

11 All citations are from Lumiansky and Mills, The Chester Mystery Cycle, Vol. I: Text. All passages will henceforth be cited parenthetically by pageant and line number within the text.
Invocations present in early fourteenth-century sermons, such as that contained in Sloane MS. 2478, suggest a similar attention to establishing the spatial and temporal continuum between sacred past and audience present, as found throughout the Chester cycle. In the sermon, part of a Palm Sunday celebration, the speaker/performer addresses his audience as Caiphas and proceeds to describe his role in Christian history, while explaining the past and contemporary significance of Palm Sunday. Speaking to a contemporary audience about the meaning and necessity of the Palm observance, Caiphas connects his past weariness with that of his audience and will later maintain this continuum in order to demonstrate that present day palms are as significant to the original event as the original event is to the present day palms (see Brown 105-17 for text). The Caiphas-Palm Sunday sermon is an example of the sermone semidrammatico, a genre that played a large role in Franciscan evangelicalism throughout the early and high Middle Ages (see Jeffrey, “Franciscan Spirituality” 17-45). It connects the aesthetics of a dramatic sermon to the early career of religious vernacular drama, suggesting that in Franciscan theology may be revealed more specific ideological precedents for the participatory and inclusive response style engaged by Moses and his audience-attentive counterparts in the Chester cycle.

Expositor delivers three addresses in pageant IV, concludes pageants V and VI with lengthy speeches, delivers two addresses in pageant XII and four in pageant XXII; Nuntius appears twice in pageant IV—announcing the end of pageant III and the beginning of pageant IV, and then concluding pageant IV with a speech declaring the opening of pageant V—and appears once in the middle of pageant VI.

Richard Axton describes the “exhortation” speeches of the “Cambridge Prologue” and “Rickinghall Fragment” (dating from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century) in terms that seem also to describe Nuntius’ audience addresses: “the whole dramatic function of the conventional exhortation to silence and good order seems to be a positive invitation to frolic—a challenge to a ‘game’ in which actors and audience provoke one another . . . . a ‘game’ drama in which both actors and audience have a physical part” (166). See also V. A. Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi, 8-32.
Hans-Jürgen Diller, drawing upon Dilthey's distinction between the world of the play and the world of the audience, has described Expositor as an "edificational" audience-address figure, one who "inform[s] and ediff[ies] the audience while at the same time keeping the play-sphere closed" to the audience (114). For Diller, however, Nuntius also qualifies as an edificational figure, one who also maintains a closed play-sphere (114-15). This characterization, however, does not account for the significant differences between these two figures and their contrasting treatments of performance and audience.

Compare also, for example, the following: "if the Spirit be not in a man, he worketh not the will of God, neither understandeth it, thou he babble never so much of the scriptures. Nevertheless such a man may work after his own imagination, but God's will can be not work" ("Parable" 78); "where he [the Spirit of God] is not, there is not the understanding of the scripture, but unfruitful disputing and brawling about words" (88); and "let every man pray to God to send him his Spirit, to loose his from his natural blindness and ignorance, and to give him understanding and feeling of the things of God (88-89).

Expositor, moreover, despite his authoritative stance, reveals at times an uncertainty about his actual role. He emphatically asserts his and his audience's temporal and spatial distance from the play and the events it portrays, but he vacillates between interpretations and summary while providing direct references to authoritative citations. His indeterminate role suggests that he is a recently employed figure, not as clearly defined as the theatrical aesthetic and tradition to which he is a controlling response. Nuntius, by contrast, seems to belong to a previously established tradition, signalled by two separate speeches in two different pageants in which he repeats a similar parting invocation to his audience:

That lord that dyed one Good Frydaye,
all, both night and daye,
Farewell, my lordinges, I goe my waye;
I may noe lenger abyde. (IV.488-91)
That lord that dyed one Good Frydaye, the same you hee have you all both night and daye.
Nuntius uses an invocation reminiscent of folk play traditions that seem to predate the origin of vernacular religious drama in the fourteenth century (see Axton 184ff).

18 Travis' work builds, in part, upon that of Clopper in “History and Development.”

19 While influenced by Jauss’ theory of conceptualizing history through reconstructing the readers and audiences of literature and their shifting responses through time—“the dialectical character of historical praxis for art and literature” (14-15)—my work here is also informed by the methods of New Historicism.

20 The very nature of the audience-address figure and the drama itself, therefore, reveals that in addition to reception aesthetics, my work necessitates an attention to a theoretical approach which, while “decentering systems of authority and dismantling hierarchies leads not merely to eclecticism but to new, more egalitarian structures of relationship” and “dispenses with historiographic grands recits not in order to escape from historicity but to recover it in its local, concrete form” (Patterson 90). In what he terms “a historicist postmodernism,” Lee Patterson asserts that “the hierarchical Modernist binarism of present and past is rewritten as difference” (90).

21 Interestingly, David Mills resurrected Righter’s concept in his essay on the Balaak and Balaam episode in the Chester cycle. See "The Two Versions of Chester Play V: Balaam and Balaak."

22 This view of history is also related to the impact of beliefs associated with the Incarnation and the Eucharist, to the meeting of divine and physical bodies that these doctrines detailed. Perhaps drawing upon an emphasis upon Christ’s worldly and physical presences in the later Middle Ages, those who participated in the religious drama may have sought a physical and emotional immediacy con-
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nected to Jeffrey’s idea of “recurrence.” See Miri Rubin, “Eucharist” and Corpus Christi; Gail MacMurray Gibson, especially 1-18; Sarah Beckwith, “Ritual” and Christ’s Body; Charles Zita; J. W. Robinson; and Gusrav Aulen.

23 What occurs in these moments of communication and reception in the early drama is perhaps different from what Anthony Gash has called a tension between the “abstract” and “monolithic” language of the official ecclesiastical hierarchy and the “materialist” and “ambivalent” of the carnivalesque idiom.” Instead, the audience experiences a co-creation of meaning and consequence which melds the monolithic and abstract with the carnivalesque (or celebratory) and the materialistic. Cf. also Hubert and Mauss’ assertion regarding [worship] ceremonies that “with no intermediary there is no sacrifice. Because the victim [or intermediary] is distinct from the sacrifices and the god, it separates them while uniting them: they draw close to each other, without giving themselves to each other entirely” (100). In the case of this earlier aesthetic that I am exploring, the mediating goal seems to be an overt attempt at a complete “giving [of the audience’s] selves” to the creation and meaning of the events presented.

24 “The early Tudor royal proclamation can be defined as: a public ordinance issued by the King, in virtue of his royal perogative, with the advice of his council, under the Great Seal, and by royal writ” (Hughes and Larkin xxiii). Furthermore, “the general protocol of the document thus reveals it as a public ordinance having its origin in the King’s perogative” (xxiv).

25 Indeed, Diller has suggested that “the plays [of Chester] as we have them constitute a sixteenth-century reaction to earlier popular forms of dramatic activity” (74). Yet, while Diller distinguishes between edificational figures such as Expositor—who “sall[y] forth from the ‘World’ of the play, keeping it thus open to the First World of the audience”—and “histrionic” figures (113) who “break . . . the play sphere” (117), he also assumes that a gap or space exists between play and audience (what he terms the “two worlds”) for both figure types. This gap over which Diller’s histrionic figures reach
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seems to contradict his own description of the Middle English cycle plays' original aesthetic: unlike liturgical drama, he asserts that the "play-sphere and audience sphere" of the cycle plays did not face "each other, but the play-sphere arose from the world in which the audience lived" (75).

26 Travis has also usefully described this distinction: "unlike reader-response criticism, Rezeptionsästhetik emphasizes the historicity and alterity of literary works from the past. Travis also argues that both reader response criticism and Rezeptionsästhetik "are . . . explicitly inscribed in the strategies of various kinds of medieval literature. Reader-response criticism naturally suits the more bookish and self-reflexive literary forms, and Rezeptionsästhetik more appropriately obtains to oral and dramatic forms addressed to a large public audience" ("Affective Criticism" 202).


28 See also Peter Meredith's speculations about these stage directions and Chester's tyrants in "'Make the Asse to Speake' Or Staging the Chester Plays," 58.

29 Interestingly, the Nuncius of the Pride of Life describes the King of Life as one who "florresschist with thi brigt bronde" (Davis, 98, l. 277). Both Nuncius and the King of Life are audience-attentive figures, interacting with them physically and spatially.

30 Similarly, when in the fifth pageant, Moses, Balaak, and Balaam each address the audience, they assume between the audience and "the people of Israel" a contemporaneity that acknowledges and engages the audience's expected role in the successful re-staging of sacred events. The stage directions, too, evince this audience engagement: "Tune Moyses faciet signum quasi effoderet tabulas de monte et, super ipsas scribens dicat populo" (s.d. ff. V, 80, my emphasis) causes. The assertion in the stage directions that Moses will speak to the people anticipates that his declaration will include the audience:
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Godes folke of Israell,
herkens you all to my spell.
God bade ye should keep well
this that I shall saye. (Chester, V, 81-84)

Following this short speech, another stage direction indicates Moses' position on the mountain, designated as a location on the pageant wagon (or on a hill if part of a stationary performance), which places him in an opportune location for addressing the audience and including them in the sacred enactment. Later intermingling with the crowd that is both ancient people and contemporary audience, Balaak commands his knight:

Yea, looke thou hett him gould great one
and landes for to live upon
to destroye them as hee cann,
these freekes that bine soe fell. (V, 172-75, my emphasis)

Balaak's plans "to destroye" the crowd may well have elicited an animated response from them. And less than one hundred lines later he has occasion to refer to them again in enlisting Balaam's aid. Balaam here sees the very audience to whom he refers in lines 280-82, "How may I curse here in this place / that people that God blessed hasse?" and whom he directly invokes a few lines later: "Now on things I will tell you all, / hereafter what shall befall"(320-21ff). See Leonard Powlick, "Staging," for a convincing argument for stationary performance. For recent work in support of pageant wagon production, see Ruth Brant Davis, "The Scheduling of the Chester Cycle Plays."

31 Prophet processions are not an uncommon feature of medieval religious drama. Without Expositor's intercessory explanations, perhaps Chester's prophet procession would resemble a form of the sermone semidrammatico. See above, nt. 12.

32 A boastful speech from Octavian directed at the audience and contemporary crowd immediately follows Nuntius' declaration. Octavian begins his speech in garbled French, directly invoking the au-
dience: "Segneurs, tous si assembles a mes probes estates!" Mills, in his modern language edition, renders this in English as "Lords, all assembled here at my noble council" (Chester 108). With members of his court are assembled around him, Octavian clearly aims his speech at more than just this limited audience. In fact, the audience easily moves into the role of the taxed people, and in lines 373-88, the declaration by Nuntius/Preco of the taxation mandate further seals the audience's role as people under Octavian's rule.

33 Cf., as well, the inclusive audience address style of the Angel audience-address figure (who also resembles Nuntius) at the end of pageant XI, lines 327-34.

34 Cf. the participatory process in Caiphas' treatment of his audience in the dramatic sermon from the Sloane MS (see nt. 12 above). There, audience members are both present-day pilgrims bearing palms and, simultaneously, contemporaries of Caiphas and Christ; both of these roles meld in the necessity for re-creating and communicating the significance of the original event (see lines 133-38).

35 However, the Devil may have certainly aided this continuum by delivering his addresses while circulating through, looking at, and gesturing toward the audience.

36 See above, p. 17, for Jauss' comments on the process of "work."

37 The transition in pageant XII to a thematically different episode in the life of Christ also suggests that the addition of Expositor to the play may have been accompanied by additional emendations, including the curious pairing of the Temptation with the Woman Taken in Adultery. Christ's writing in the dirt in response to the Pharisees' accusations of the Adulteress suggests perhaps a rather distant interpretation and commentary on the scene. This may create a potentially useful precedent for Reformation methodologies that Expositor has echoed in his own commentaries throughout the cycle, and which he emphasizes in his concluding explication of the episode (281-310):

Nowe, lorde, I pray you marke here
the great goodnes of Godes deede.
I will declare, as hit is neede,
these thynge that playd were. (281-84)
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By extension, what also links the enigmatically paired Temptation and Woman Taken in Adultery is a sense of overturning the inconsistent and misleading perceptions of both the Devil and the Pharisees and, perhaps, the Devil's engagement of the audience in a participatory aesthetic. Expositor portrays the Devil, the Pharisees, and "these things that playd were" as confused and confusing figures from the past. They are archaisms which the audience must recognize as dangerous and misleading. In "The Possibilities of Performance" I argue that the audience of the Digby Conversion of Saint Paul is directed toward a similar process of recognition—a process perhaps instigated by a Reformation manipulation of text and performance.

38 See also Tyndale's explanation of what first encouraged him to translate the New Testament: "Because I had perceived by experience how that is was impossible to establish the lay-people in any truth, except the scripture wer plainly laid before their eyes in their mother-tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text" ("Preface" 394).

39 Expositor's emphasis on explication, not surprisingly, resembles the formal practice of Protestant prophesying. Originally meetings of preachers for the purpose of explicating the Bible and theology, prophesyingings gained popularity from the 1560s in England and, as Patrick Collinson points out, grew to include sermons and "systematic Biblical exposition[5]" (51). Collinson also asserts that "by the public interest which they attracted and the indoctrination and homiletical training which they offered to the more ignorant clergy, the prophesyingings did more than any other agency to propagate and establish the new religion in Elizabethan England" (51). Emphasizing the audience's auditory faculties rather than their visual and physical involvement, such prophesyingings find echoes in Chester's pageant of the Prophets of Antichrist as well as in the H manuscript's pageant of Balaak and Balaam. In "The Last Rise and Final Demise of Essex Town Drama," John Coldewey also suggests that the popularity of public prophesyingings and sermons demonstrate a change in taste, a substitution for the "old religious plays" no longer in style (259ff).

40 See also Mills, Staging the Chester Plays, 10-13.
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