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the Fall of Man and Christ's Passion

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I

And Adam knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord.

Thus begins the Story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Now, the brothers were created because "Adam knew Eve, his wife," that is, they came into the world through the original sin. They are the direct result of this sin and the children of the Fall of Man. The mystery plays dealing with the murder of Abel all emphasize this connection between the Fall of Man and the subsequent murder. In the Fall of Man, Adam has fallen in the sin by giving priority to his own view over God's commandment. That relatively passive disregard for God's order is worsened, in the following generation, into a frontal affront upon God's authority as William Neil in his commentary on Genesis states:

[The episode of the murder of Abel is] intended by the compiler of the prologue to reinforce the teaching of chs. 1-3. It repeats the theme of the Fall but at a faster tempo. Disobedience by the father [i.e. Adam] now develops into murder by his son. The rebellious Adam which is in us all

is now revealed as the murderous Cain.¹

In the Fall of Man, Adam, through the sin, has lost many of the privileges initially given by God: he can no longer dwell in Paradise where no physical pain or material privation exists. The punishment is not confined outside the man; it is also within him. Adam, now struggling with his sullied body and nature, must await his inevitable death. Moreover, the stain of the sin will have to be carried over to his offsprings as Saint Augustine says:

... sinning, the punishment of death was inflicted upon them [Adam and Eve] and all their posterity: for they should not produce anything but what themselves were, and the greatness of their crime depraved their nature, so that that which was penal in the first man's offending, was made natural in the birth of all the rest...²

Yet, the result of the sin is, as already stated, not simply inherited as it is, but is aggravated in the succeeding generation; the aim of the authors of Genesis and, accordingly, of the mystery plays in recording and staging the murder is to show how serious the original sin proved to be.

Thus in the person of Cain, we see the dark side of human history. But, in the person of Abel, we can peer at a glimmer of hope. Obviously, Abel, who dies crying "I am slayn, and not gilty" (l. 329),³ is a type of Jesus and, putting aside Adam and the notion of the fortunate Fall, is the first of the generations of proto-messiahs, which Saint Bonaventure confirms:

From that time [of the Fall] his [God's] heavenly mercy has not ceased calling straying man back to the way of penance

by giving hope of forgiveness and by promising that a Savior would come. Lest such condescension on God's part should fail to effect our salvation because of ignorance and ingratitude, he never ceased announcing, promising and prefiguring the coming of his Son in the five Ages of history, through the patriarchs, judges, priests, kings and prophets, from Abel the Just to John the Baptist.⁴

The murder of Abel by his brother is, therefore, a murder of a proto-messiah by someone who is very dear to the victim, an idea which is also very much the motif of the Passion. Hence, the murder whose root is the Fall of Man should be seen through the Passion, and is the first page of the continuous conflict between the murdered and the murderer, the good and the evil, and the City of God and the City of man :

Cain therefore was the first begotten of those two that were mankind's parents, and he belongs to the city of man; Abel was the later, and he belongs to the city of God.⁵

II

In order to indicate the cause-and-effect relationship between the Fall of Man and the murder of Abel, one does well to present the two events in one continuous play. In fact, that is how those events are handled in the Chester and N-town cycles as well as in *The Cornish Ordinalia* and *Le mystère d'Adam*.⁶ In York and Towneley, however, the murder of Abel is dramatized in a separate play. In York, this is not done perhaps because the playwright preferred to write a separate play for the event. The York cycle,

held in a prosperous city with many guilds, may have had to include more plays than desirable. Thus, the York play of "Cain and Abel" is the seventh play of the cycle, whereas, for example, the Chester playwright needed only two plays to cover the same events. The York playwright wrote four short plays in order to dramatize events from the creation of Adam to his expulsion from Paradise. Yet, these events could have been more effectively represented in a single pageant. In fact, in the York "Cain and Abel," the author takes some pains to remind the audience of the continuity of the Old Testament events by having an angel recount what had happened before the brothers came around. In this way, the audience is led into the mythical, elevated world of Genesis and becomes ready to view the play in a historical perspective.

On the other hand, in Towneley there is no such recapitulation of the Creation and the Fall of Man, nor is there any solemn introduction by a weighty character like an angel. Far from that, what we have is a lowly young servant who "ianglis" before the audience, using the kind of language which must have offended some well-mannered medieval burghers. The scene before the audience is not the ancient, mythical world of Genesis, but a medieval farm with a few common farmers whom they meet everyday. Certainly, generous sprinkling of intentional anachronism or medievalization is a standard feature of any mystery play. Yet, considering how theologically crucial the connection between the Fall of Man and the murder of Abel is, we might wonder why the author, the Wakefield Master, seems

to avoid referring to the Fall of Man. In sharp contrast with many instances of medievalization, details directly pointing at the previous event seem few. There is no mention of Paradise. No one talks about Eve. Adam is recalled simply as a "fader" (l. 72), yet no one calls his name. Of course, the brothers do not talk about how their parents erred. We are even unsure as to whether they know the Fall at all. In the other cycles, the parents or an angel make them understand the story, and thus, the rationale, behind their tithing. In Towneley, it seems that the only tenuous thread connecting this play to Adam is Abel's following words:

Oure fader vs bad, oure fader vs kend,
That oure tend shuld be brend. (ll. 72-73)

In other words, the playwright here seems to tinker with the given biblical material in order to make the message relevant to the medieval audience. This popularization, along with all the contemporary references and four-letter words, may make us suspect that the Wakefield Master overindulges in his idiosyncrasy, forgetting the basic message as a biblical play.⁷

But does he really neglect the historical perspective? Referring to the Chester version, Peter W. Travis writes:

Chester remains close to the universal symbolism of Scripture and far from any temptations to make contemporary, comic, or satirical the deeds of the first family.⁸

Then, has the Wakefield Master succumbed to the "temptation to make contemporary, comic, or satirical the deeds

of the first family” at the expense of “the universal symbolism of Scripture”? No, he fashions the play in this way to get the biblical message across more effectively. Both the temporal present of Cain and Abel and that of a medieval English farm come under the same eternal present of God’s perspective as Clifford Davidson writes :

...the Wakefield cycle plays typically see all history as *Heilsgeschichte*, with time collapsed into a pattern which permeates the whole dramatic structure of the cycle. The audience is made to look at history from the point of view of the eternal for whom, according to Tertullian, there is no ‘difference of time’ (*differentia temporis*).⁹

After all, the mystery plays are not a medieval equivalent of the objective teaching of history at a modern school; they are not supposed to mythicize the history as something remote in the past, but to strengthen the audience’s moral and religious belief. For that purpose, the materials should be adapted to become as relevant to the audience’s everyday life as possible. And this purpose befits the theological notion of God’s eternal perspective. As a result, the Wakefield *Mactacio Abel* has become a multifaceted, yet unified panorama which, while relating the murder of Abel, reflects the Fall of Man, the Passion, and the medieval England.

III

In the other plays dealing with the murder of Abel, the brothers are explicitly instructed about the fact of the Fall and their duty to tithe. In Towneley, as we have seen, that

they have been similarly taught is implied but not staged. This fact strengthens our uncertainty about whether Cain is really aware of the past and of how deeply indebted mankind is to God. Yet, this lack of continuity, this severance from the past on Cain's part is quite deliberate: it shows further alienation from God and worse degradation of man's nature after the Fall. This is the way the Wakefield Master chooses to present the outcome of the Fall of Man.

The Towneley Cain, more than any other Cain in the biblical plays in England, consistently denies his relationship with God. His extreme reluctance to offer a tithe should not just be taken to show his greed. He is unconvinced that God created them and that everything they possess comes from Him as Abel recognizes by saying, "God giffys the all thi lifyng" (l. 98). He sees no reason to pay the tithe since he considers himself free of any debt to God:

Gayn. Yit boroed I neuer a farthyng
Of hym—here my hand. (ll. 99-100)

By this, he refuses to acknowledge the fact of the Creation. Yet, as a struggling farmer fighting with the harsh nature for which God must be to blame, he is keenly aware of the results of the Fall. He complains:

At yere tyme I sew fayre corn,
Yit was it sich when it was shorne:
Thystyls and brerys—yei, grete plenté—
And all kyn wedys that myght be. (ll. 200-03)

This echoes the lines in Genesis about God's punishment

of Adam :

...cursed is the ground for thy [Adam's] sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground.... (Gen. 3. 17-19)

Compared with the Chester Cain who has "Of corne . . . great plentee" (II, l. 517),¹⁰ the Towneley Cain seems more appropriately cast as a poor, grumbling farmer coming after the Fall. Mankind has lost the privilege to live with nature in harmony. The earth refuses to yield generously to Cain, so he has to force the earth to give up its increase and he wants to grab as much as he can possibly get. In this contentious situation, God is not one who gives or loans as Abel believes, but one who lets Cain stay hungry. To such a Lord, Cain does not feel obligated to give :

When I shuld saw, and wantyd seyde,
 And of corn had full grete neyde,
 Then gaf he me none of his;
 No more will I gif hym of this.
 Hardely hold me to blame
 Bot if I serue hym of the same. (ll. 124-29)

Cain gives to God according to what he thinks is his "skill" (l. 260) or a reasonable thing. Thus, as he ignores the facts of the Creation and the Fall, he bases his judgment solely on his earthly value system. If God does not subscribe to it, he turns a deaf ear to what He says. When God scolds him for his unfaithful attitude, Cain's reaction is :

Gaym. Whi, who is that hob ouer the wall?

We! who was that that piped so small? (ll. 297-98)

For Cain, God's reason is unreasonable, and as he is convinced of his righteousness, "God is out of hys wit" (l. 300). Considering God as insane, Cain seems to become "out of hys wit" himself since he tries to disown Him on whom his whole existence depends.¹¹

Thus, man's worsening estrangement from God after the Fall is well-demonstrated in the Towneley Cain. In place of God and the faith in Him, Cain puts forward an egocentric value system based on the profit-motive. We need not elaborate on how possessive Cain is: the whole play testifies that. As for Cain's egocentrism, his general attitude toward Abel exemplifies it. While Abel consistently addresses Cain as "Brother," "Leif brother," and "Dere brother," Cain never uses such words; it is as if Cain forgot about who Abel is.¹² For him, Abel is simply the one who constantly nags and meddles with someone else's business. To that kind of preachy, uninvited do-gooder, a self-reliant yeoman like Cain can only say, "Leave me alone!":

Gaym. How that I tend, rek the neuer a deill,

Bot tend thi skabbid shepe wele;

For if thou to my teynd tent take,

It bese the wars for thi sake. (ll. 247-50)

By refusing to listen to his brother, he is severing his ties with God and his family. In the mystery plays, we find other such characters whose self-interest takes precedence over God. Cain is not another Satan who is intent on obstructing God's power, but instead resembles a willful

bystander at the Crucifixion who does not bother to help Jesus, even though Jesus is dying for the salvation of people like him. The Towneley and York playwrights aptly dramatize such human callousness by the person of Simon in the Passion plays. Asked by the soldiers to help Jesus carry the Cross, Simon replies :

Symon Goode sirs, þat may nouȝt be,
For full grete haste haue I.

My wayes are lang and wyde,
And I may noȝht abide
For drede I come to late,
For sureté haue I hight
Muste be fulfillid þis nyght,
Or it wil paire my state. (York, XXXIV, ll. 248-55)¹³

This York version has one interesting point which Towneley does not possess. This Simon wants to be allowed to go and leave Jesus behind with the Cross whose weight He can no longer bear. For he has promised "sureté" which must be fulfilled that night. We detect in him another Cain who ignores God for the sake of profit.

Or, for that matter, we cannot forget to mention Judas who sells Jesus for a petty amount of money,¹⁴ nor Towneley Pilate who wavers in his judgement, according to bribes he gets :

The right side to socoure, certys, I am full bayn,
If I may get therby a vantage or wynyng;
Then to the fals parte I turne me agayn,
ffor I se more Vayll will to me be risyng;

(Towneley, XXII, ll. 16-19)

These rogues are the Christ-killers in the Passion play, and their profit-motive and egocentrism can be traced to the first human being born after the Fall.

Moreover, there are other motifs in Cain's character which remind us of the Christ-killers. Like Judas who helps to kill Jesus and falls in the gravest sin of despair, thinking his crime is too odious to be forgotten, Cain does not seek mercy from God :

It is no boyte mercy to craue,
For if I do I mon none haue. (ll. 376-77)

Yet Cain's refusal to seek mercy from God is not the same as Judas' despair : his is more like Satan's rebellion, shadowed not by sorrow but by defiance. In fact, Satan or Lucifer in the cycles exhibits some similarities to our Cain. Cain's offering burns with black smoke which reminds us of the similarly suffocating smoke in hell as we see it when Lucifer in York screams in hell : "Owte on þhow, lurdans, þe smore me in smoke," (l. 117). When Cain accuses Abel that the offering burns badly because of him (l. 288), we may recall that the devils in the cycles blame each other for the fall. Lucifer in Chester shows the same sign of despair as Cain's :

For my sinne soe horryble is
and I have donne soe mucche amysse,
that unworthy I am iwysse
forgevenes to attayne. (II, ll. 641-44)

Instead of giving himself up to God's judgement, Cain dares to devise a mock-trial in which he forgives Pikeharnes

and himself. Curiously, Cain is not as fearful of incurring God's wrath as he is of being persecuted by earthly authorities :

For ferd I qwake, and can no rede ;
For be I taken, I be bot dede. (ll. 338-39)

Thus, when Pikeharnes threatens to forsake him "for ferde of grevance" (l. 402) and possibly to make the fact of the murder public, Cain literally begs his mercy, saying :

Caym. A, syr, I cry you mercy! Seasse,
And I shall make you a releasse. (ll. 406-07)

Suddenly using words like "syr" and "you," Cain is shamelessly servile to his servant whom he is accustomed to mistreat most harshly. In his earthly value system, the world is coming upside-down: he fears not God but earthly authorities and seeks mercy from his servant while he refuses to beg God's leniency.

With his promise of "releasse" to Pikeharnes, Cain imagines himself to be a king. Yet what sort of king did he and his medieval audience have in mind? Bennett A. Brockman suggests that the playwright is referring to specifics of contemporary legal practices when he lets Cain proclaim the king's peace.¹⁵ And this king's peace is appropriately used (or abused) by Cain in this context because, in Brockman's words, "the royal prerogative of pardon was one of the most widely known and deeply resented aspects of the administration of justice in late medieval England."¹⁶ Therefore, when Cain proclaimed the king's peace on medieval stage, "it consequently must have been greeted with derisive

laughter."¹⁷ Thus, Cain's self-exoneration from the punishment for the murder is itself ironically patterned after the contemporary judicial abuses.

Furthermore, the playwright may well expect us to keep this mock-trial scene in memory when other, far graver trials, the trials of Jesus, are enacted. There in the Passion plays, the trials are all ultimately preposterous since men, and corrupt ones at that, dare to judge the Judge of all mankind. As an evidence already referred indicates, Pilate in Towneley is the most rotten of all the wicked players of any English Passion play.¹⁸ This Pilate, when exhorting his soldiers, specifically indicates their affinity with Cain:

pilatus. Now curtes kasers of kamys kyn,
 most gentyll of lure to me that I fynde,
 My comforth from care may ye sone wyn,
 if ye happely may hent that vnheynde. (XX, ll. 639-42)

When this Pilate and his subordinates of "kamys kin" sentence that Jesus be crucified, and that He pay for man's sin with His undeserved death, we may recall Cain's mock-trial and his undeserved immunity.

In *Mactacio Abel*, Cain is serious enough while holding his mock-trial, yet his words are constantly undercut and made ludicrous by Pikeharnes' asides. Also in the Passion plays, the judges' authority is utterly destroyed, this time not by unwanted noise, but by the steadfast silence of suffering Jesus, by which the judges become most exasperated. While Pikeharnes thinks his master "rafe" (l. 424), the irritated kings such as Herod Antipas in York madly rave:

Comes nerre, kyng, into courte. Saie, can ze not knele?
 We schalle haue gaudis full goode and games or we goo.
 Howe likes þa, wele lorde? Saie. What, deuylle, neuere
 a dele?

I faute in my reuerant in otill moy.
 I am of fauour, loo, fairer be ferre.
 Kyte oute yugilment. Vta! Oy! Oy!
 Be any witte þat Y watte it will waxe werre.

Seruicia primet,

Such losellis and lurdaynes as pou, loo,

Respicias timet,

What þe deuyll and his dame schall Y now doo?

Do carpe on, carle, for Y can þe cure,

Say, may þou not here me? Oy man, arte þou woode?

(XXXI, ll. 236-48)

Thus Cain's fake trial is doubly meaningful to the audience: it reminds them of the contemporary abuse of the "king's peace," and also refers forward to the self-righteous and ridiculous judges in the Passion plays.

IV

Finally, we shall discuss Cain's plow which is aptly used to symbolize Cain's role in the divine history. Adam, the gardener in Eden, would not have needed a plow, for the earth was in harmony with and ready to cooperate with him at that time. Now, Cain badly needs it because, as a result of the Fall, the earth begrudges its fruits and because man's corrupt nature urges him to exploit the earth and to force as much harvest as possible out of it. Certainly, a plow should not always be taken as something associated

with sinners. But in the context of *Mactacio Abel*, it symbolizes man's sinful nature. Such is also Josephus' interpretation :

But Cain was not only very wicked in other respects, but was wholly intent upon getting, and he first contrived to plough the ground.... God was more delighted with the latter [Abel's] oblation, when he was honoured with what grew naturally of its own accord, than he was with what was the invention of a covetous man, and gotten by forcing the ground....¹⁹

Beginning with his plow, Cain and his offsprings start building a complex civilization divorced from God, which will eventually lead to the Flood.

Hence, driving his intractable plowteam forward, Cain is heavily weighed down by the original sin. The horses which refuse to obey his orders are characteristic of nature after the Fall, which no longer cooperates with man. If he silently drove the plowteam without any grudge, he would be like Christ carrying the heavy Cross which, in a sense, symbolizes the original sin. In fact, the way he hurries the hungry horses reminds us of the soldiers forcing the dying Jesus to carry the Cross. After the buffeting in Towneley Play XXI, the soldiers say :

primus tortor. Com furth, old crate,

Be lyfe!

we shall lede the a trott.

ijus tortor. lyft thy feete may thou not.

ffroward. Then nedys me do nott

Bot com after and dryfe. (XXI, ll. 428-32)

Just as the soldiers “knokyd hym on slepe” (XXI, l. 423), Cain complains to a horse, “Ye stand as ye were fallen in swyme” (l. 27). Still more explicitly, a comparison of the Cross to a horse is made in Play XXIII:

iiijus tortor. Stand nere, felows, and let se
how we can hors oure kyng so fre,

By any craft;

Stand thou yonder on yond syde,
And we shall se how he can ryde,

And how to weld a shaft.

primus tortor. Sir, *commys* heder and haue done,

And wyn apon youre palfray sone,

ffor he [is] redy bowne.

If ye be bond till hym, be not wrothe,

ffor be ye secure we were full lothe

On any wyse that ye fell downe. (XXIII, ll. 107-18)

Jesus carries the heavy Cross and dies on it. The Cross is not only a venerated symbol of Christian faith but a heavy burden on the Savior's shoulder and the instrument of His death. But Jesus must willingly accept it in order to offset men's sins dating back to the original sin.

Unlike Jesus, Cain cannot persevere in carrying his cross, the plow. Just as the soldiers do not themselves help carry the Cross, yet enlist Simon to help Jesus, Cain urges others to give him their hands. He says to Pikeharnes: “What, boy, shal I both hold and drife?” (l. 39), and to Abel: “Com nar, and other drife or hald—” (l. 62). In fact, if Abel, by getting murdered for being good and pious, is obviously molded to prefigure Christ, even Pikeharnes echoes Jesus' plight when he complains:

All the day to ryn and trott,
And euer amang thou strykeand ;
Thus am I comen bofettys to fott. (ll. 390-92)

Thus Cain hurries the boy, gives him "bofettys," and finally threatens to crucify him on the plow when he makes his exit :

And take yond plogh, I say,
And weynd the furth fast before ;
And I shall, if I may,
Tech the another lore.
I warn the, lad, for ay,
Fro now furth euermore,
That thou greue me noght ;
For, bi Codys sydys, if thou do,
I shall hang the apon this plo,
With this rope, lo, lad, lo,
By hym that me dere boght !
Now fayre well, felows all, for I must nedys weynd
And to the dwill be thrall, world withoutten end :
Ordand ther is my stall, with Sathanas the feynd. (ll. 452-65)

At this moment of the play, Cain is the murderer of his own brother. Yet, there is not even a speech of remorse or fear in his words. Instead, he sounds as though he were bracing himself for further outrages. With his tongue-in-cheek swears by "Codys sydys" and "hym that me dere boght," the Crucifixion motifs ring all the more ironically. We may even venture to infer that this is a sort of rehearsal in a small scale for what is to come in the climax of the cycle: the road to Calvary, not with Cain but with the murderer's distant offsprings.

V

We have examined the Towneley *Mactacio Abel* from the viewpoints of the Fall of Man and the Passion. We have seen that this Towneley play of Abel's murder, though staged separately from the Fall, is closely connected with the previous event. Furthermore, there are recurring allusions to the Passion. If we correctly interpret these allusions to both past and future, we can see that the Towneley playwright is at pains to place Abel's murder in the perspective of the whole salvation history.

Notes

- * I am much indebted to Mr. Drew McCord Stroud for reading my paper and giving suggestions. Yet, needless to say, for all the remaining inadequacies, I am solely responsible.
1. *Harper's Bible Commentary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 23.
 2. Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, 2 vols., trans. John Healey, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (London: Dent, 1945), II, 2.
 3. All citations from *Mactacio Abel* are from *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle*, ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1958); all other citations from the Towneley cycle are from *The Towneley Plays*, ed. George England and Alfred W. Pollard, EETS, E. S. 71 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1897).
 4. *The Soul's Journey into God* in *The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (London: SPCK, 1978), pp. 126-27.
 5. Augustine, II, 60.
 6. In this respect, Peter W. Travis extols the Chester version as follows: "By joining the dramatization of Cain's crime to that of Adam's original sin, Chester efficiently underscores the parallel elements between the disobedient acts of father and son and emphasizes the continuing descent of mankind into sin." See *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 92.

7. Cf. Eleanor Prosser's negative view on this: "...the main interest in the play is irrelevant to the main plot action. Shall we, then, for the sake of a few genuinely funny lines and some sharp realism mirroring contemporary medieval life, consider this play a development in dramatic structure?" See *Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays: A Re-evaluation* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1961), p. 80.
8. Travis, p. 95.
9. Clifford Davidson, "the Unity of the 'Mactacio Abel,'" *Traditio*, 23 (1967), 497.
10. All the citations from the Chester cycle are from *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, EETS, S.S. 3 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974).
11. On this "madness" theme of the play, see Jeffrey Helterman, *Symbolic Action in the Plays of the Wakefield Master* (Athens: The Univ. of Georgia Press, 1981), pp. 34-37.
12. See Helterman, p. 31.
13. All the citations from the York cycle are from *The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982).
14. See Towneley, XX, ll. 280-81.
15. Bennett A. Brockman, "The Law of Man and the Peace of God: Judicial Process as Satiric Theme in the Wakefield *Mactacio Abel*," *Speculum* 49 (1974), 699-707.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 701.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 702.
18. See note 14 and my article, "Pilate in the Towneley and York Cycles," *Studies in English Literature* 62 (1975), 197-214.
19. *The Antiquities of the Jews in Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregal Publications, 1960), p. 26.