

Christ as a Worker in the Towneley Conspiracy

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As a central character in the Corpus Christi plays, Christ has generated surprisingly little controversy among scholars of medieval drama. Certainly researchers have approached Christ from a variety of vantage points, attempting to determine whether he is more human or more divine; whether he is colorless and utilitarian or dynamic and symbolic; whether he is distinctly historical or contemporaneously medieval; whether he speaks the words of the Church or the language of the townspeople. But critics have not yet launched a full-scale study of this sacred character, whose presence extends throughout two-thirds of the Corpus Christi plays.¹ A multifaceted character whose complexity is grounded in biblical narrative,² Christ is represented both in an immediate theatrical sense and in an ongoing soteriological sense. Because of his exceedingly complex nature, we must acknowledge the contradictions which arise as we explore the polysemous ways in which Christ signifies.

Peter Travis has argued that Christ's body is semiotically significant as the *axis mundi* from which other bodies originate and look back upon to determine meaning.³ What this means theatrically is that playgoers would have viewed Christ as an archetypal figure, an exemplar whom they should emulate. But which Christ do playgoers imitate? The historical Savior, whose one-time sacrifice on their behalf has already been enacted? Or the medieval Christ, whose recited dialogue and actions contemporize who Christ is in the ongoing sense of what it means to be a fifteenth-century Christian? I suggest that the Towneley Christ, seen in representative episodes of his ministry and Passion, is a worker-exemplar whose dialogue and actions reinforce what I will call the biblical work ethos and draw attention to contradictory attitudes towards work held by the medieval populace.

After discussing the biblical work ethos, particularly as exemplified by Christ, I will examine contradictory medieval attitudes toward work. Societal attitudes toward seemingly oppositional forms of work, the *opus manuum* (the work of the hands) and the *opus Dei* (the work of God), may have influenced what playgoers saw as they witnessed Christ laboring in the plays. Using Christ's own statement that he is an *ensaumple*, I will argue that Christ theatrically reconciles conflicting attitudes toward work that were held by the general population during the late Middle Ages. I will focus on Christ's work as demonstrated in two distinct episodes of the Towneley Conspiracy: the Washing of the Disciples' Feet and the Agony in the Garden.

Work, which was sanctified by God's act of creation, came to be associated with the sweat of one's brow.⁴ Christ, as a carpenter surrounded by disciples predominantly fishermen, ennobled work, even choosing a work pattern widely known during his time: that of itinerant rabbi. Pressed by the multitudes who came to hear him preach, he did not even have time to eat (Mark 3:20). And in Samaria he was so weary from preaching he had to sit down near a well (John 4:6). To those who followed Christ's example, labor became not only a productive activity but a duty, and Paul exhorted his listeners: "if any would not work, neither should he eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).⁵

But a sense of ambiguity surrounds the conception of work, even as manifested by Christ. Is his work in the world but not *of* the world? According to David Meakin, who approaches labor history from a literary standpoint, Christian values are unworldly in the sense that visibly productive labor seems undervalued. Meakin points out that Christ relinquished carpentry and encouraged his disciples to abandon their occupations.⁶ This bifurcated view--that the work of the hands exists in the world, whereas the work of God exists in an intangible, materially unproductive, and indeed invisible realm--suggests the irreconcilable nature of the material and spiritual worlds. There is, in fact, a "doubleness of vision," which Arnold Pacey attributes to western religious tradition. Whereas Christ's kingly status has inspired crusades and motivated conquests, it is Christ the carpenter who is associated with the sick, the lowly, the hungry.⁷ The tension between the humanity and divinity of Christ, as manifested in his work, is connected to the idea of the *opus manuum* and the *opus Dei* as manifested in humankind's work. Therefore, it is easy to see how this tension

assumed the form of contradictory attitudes during the Middle Ages.

Under the influence of Benedictine monasticism, manual labor became validated as a way of serving the higher purpose of the spirit.⁸ But the attitude that the work of the hands was somehow servile had wide-ranging implications. For example, negative feelings about manual labor caused many thirteenth-century medical professors to forego concentrations in surgery or pharmacy because these disciplines mandated exclusive use of the hands.⁹ And of course Chaucer's Pardoner boasted he would not stoop to labor with his hands at basket-weaving.¹⁰

The status of manual labor was being disputed not only in the monasteries and in the universities, but also in the confessional. According to Jacques Le Goff, after The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, obligatory confession brought a flurry of penitents asking priests to articulate how the demands of one's occupation could be reconciled with Church policy on the Sabbath rest, for example.¹¹ Certainly parishioners could not discern how work was to be defined from Sunday sermons. As G. R. Owst points out, the ten-n *labor* was highly ambiguous as used in the pulpit, at times referring specifically to manual labor alone.¹²

Any fifteenth-century audience viewing the Corpus Christi plays would have been aware of these ambiguities and negative sentiments toward manual labor. Having inherited the cultural stigma associated with manual work passed

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along from the monasteries and the universities, residents of Wakefield (home of the Towneley cycle) were nonetheless wool and textile traders -craftsmen and peasants, men and women--the bulk of whose work was done with their hands. All medieval workers became heir to Adam's legacy, and in an increasingly profit-driven economy, the sweat of their brows reinforced the connection between Adam's curse and their own *opus manuum*.

With this widespread cultural stigma against manual labor as a background, I now turn to two episodes in *The Conspiracy*, one of Christ's Passion sequences. During the Washing of the Disciples' Feet, Christ performs manual labor. And during the Agony in the Garden, Christ performs what appears to be the work of God in a context that recalls Adam's curse of eating bread in the sweat of one's brow. These two scenes ask us to consider not only what the nature of Christ's work can be said to be, but how Christ's work relates to humankind's work centuries after Christ's one-time sacrifice has already been accomplished.

The Conspiracy contains a variety of biblical episodes: the conspiracy against Christ as orchestrated by Pilate, Caiaphas, Annas, and Judas, the Last Supper, the Washing of the Disciples' Feet, the Agony in the Garden, Christ's healing of Malcus's severed ear, and the ultimate capture. Not all of these episodes are theatrically effective. Indeed, John Gardner maintains that Peter's severing of Malcus's ear provides the only theatrical action in the play.¹³ However, the two episodes of the Washing of the Disciples' Feet and the Agony in the Garden are highly evocative because Christ's exemplary status is reinforced.

As *The Conspiracy* opens, Pilate silences the crowd, proclaiming his potency and leveling charges against Jesus. Together Pilate, Caiaphas, and Annas marshal their evidence: Christ has preached he will destroy their law (ll. 38), has worked on the Sabbath day (ll. 112-113), and has resurrected Lazarus (ll. 126-129).¹⁴ Oddly, the authorities judge what audiences know to be God's work in the same terms that they judge man's work. Not only Christ's actions but his words condemn him: he has unduly influenced the people by proclaiming himself their Savior (ll. 48-50) and the Son of God (ll. 134-137). After Judas negotiates the selling of his master, Christ makes his first appearance, dispatching his disciples to secure a room for their Passover meal (ll. 316ff). The Last Supper does not include the blessing of the bread and wine but begins with Christ inviting his disciples to partake of the meal and moves rather quickly to the recognition of Judas's betrayal. As Rosemary Woolf contends, because the Towneley dramatist omits the institution of the Eucharist, we gain a sense of a dramatist hurriedly rushing through the reverent scene.¹⁵ Since Towneley's Last Supper is more ritually functional than dramatically effective,¹⁶ I will proceed to a scene that I believe demonstrates Christ's theatrical quality. I disagree with Martin Stevens's assessment that Towneley dramatists wanted to emphasize natural man rather than Christ in the cycle. Stevens takes as evidence the minimal dialogue appropriated to Christ in the plays.¹⁷ While dialogue is a facile communicator in the theatre, it is not the sole form of communication.

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Before looking at the first episode, we must recall the circumstances preceding the Washing of the Disciples' Feet as established in Luke, Chapter 22: verses 24 and following. At the Last Supper the apostles began to argue about who Christ's betrayer would be, and they began to wonder who among them was considered greatest. In the Towneley play after each disciple has asked whether he is the betrayer, Christ establishes Judas's guilt (ll. 373), whereupon he predicts each of his disciples will forsake him that night. Peter's indignation and his assertion that he alone will remain steadfast even if the others flee can be construed as unflinching loyalty. Spectators know Peter will forsake his master by the time the cock crows three times. Yet his articulation that he alone will not flee recalls the apostles' dispute over moral superiority, which precedes the Washing of the Disciples' Feet in the Luke account.

Applying Pamela Sheingom's suggestion that we read medieval dramatic texts visually,¹⁸ I suggest that we envision what spectators see in regard to Peter. Even though his proclamation of steadfastness still rings in the air, playgoers know Peter will deny Christ. However, they view Peter being paid a gesture of obeisance as Christ kneels in front of him. As Theodore Lerud has shown, gestures of homage, such as bowing or kneeling, often demonstrate attitudes toward sovereignty in the Corpus Christi plays.¹⁹ And here Christ not only kneels to a disciple who has just articulated his own moral superiority, but he performs manual labor for his benefit.

In line with the biblical account in John, Peter initially protests against having his feet washed by his master, stating his sensitivity to reversing the lord-servant relationship (ll. 386-387). If Peter cannot submit, Christ proclaims, he cannot enter into heaven's bliss with his master (ll. 392-393). Christ explains he is setting an *ensaumple*: his followers should wash each other's feet; and no servant is better than his lord (ll. 408-415). The *Middle English Dictionary* defines *ensaumple* as "something spoken or written to teach a lesson, or to convince or persuade."²⁰ We must ask: how is Christ's theatrical presentation of humility a lesson particularly applicable to a fifteenth-century audience? One response is that particular conflicts still unresolved from Christ's era would be intensified viewing the mystery plays-- for instance, contradictory attitudes towards work. Playgoers who exalted themselves above practitioners of manual labor were reminded that they were ignoring the lesson of Christ's demonstration of the *opus manuum* as he washed his disciples' feet.²¹ What the *ensaumple* provides audiences, then, is an unambiguous context for the biblical work ethos, which needed particular heeding during the later Middle Ages.

The next episode that draws attention to Christ's labor is the Agony in the Garden, during which Christ's humanity bends under the weight of his divinity. The work Christ must perform is arduous; his labor is an angst-ridden *opus Dei*, posing a sharp contrast to the painless yet instructive *opus manuum* conducted during the footwashing episode. Two striking similarities nevertheless link this anguish-centered scene to the previous episode: Christ's work as a servant and Peter's/Christ's attitudinal or physiological aversion to servitude. If we consider the almost 90 lines of dialogue between the two scenes, a further connection

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becomes clear. Audiences viewing *The Conspiracy* would have heard Christ telling his disciples: "in this nyght ilkon / ye shall fro me fle" (ll. 418-419), words which prefigure his own fugitive leanings in the Garden. These lines are directed to all disciples present (Peter, James, and John), but the intimate connection between Christ and Peter theatrically established during the footwashing ritual (Peter having been the only disciple to speak) foreshadows the one servant-one lord bond that is particularly poignant in the Garden. Although Peter's spirit and flesh have recoiled from reversing the lord-servant relationship, his eventual acceptance of the reversal recasts Peter as lord. Importantly, his obedience mirrors Christ's submission to his Father at Gethsemane, where the perceived distance between lord and servant increases as the consequences of not performing God's work become rife with cosmic significance. During the Agony in the Garden, Christ fulfills his own earlier prediction about desertion when he falters in serving his own master as the gravity of the work he must perform descends upon him.

Audiences viewing *The Conspiracy* would have seen Christ approaching Mt. Olivet, his soul heavy against anticipated death (ll. 498-499), and his flesh sick with fear (ll. 511). Rosemary Woolf has pointed out that in Towneley, York, and N-Town, Christ's fear of death is stressed, an interpretation contrary to most medieval commentaries but emphasizing his human nature.²² As commented upon in the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, Christ seems to have lost sight that he is "equal to his Father and co-eternal"; and he "prays like a man."²³ Spectators would have recalled the gospel accounts of Matthew and Mark, which depict Christ having fallen upon the ground to pray, and Luke, which introduces the blood-like sweat and the comforting angel (Matthew 26:39, Mark 14:35, Luke

22: 43-44). When Christ falls upon the ground or kneels in prayer (stage directions in Towneley do not specify which), his prostrate gesture conveys the oppressive burden of his servitude. Audiences would have remembered the profuse sweat described in the Luke account as they witnessed Christ's distressful *opus Dei*. They know that Adam's curse--eating bread in the sweat of one's brow--must be reversed through this second Adam's toilsome labor. Further, the sweat Christ expends in the Luke account is "as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). Christ's body must shed blood, not just sweat, as illustrated so frequently in iconography. In fifteenth-century woodcuts, Christ is portrayed praying to his Father on Olivet. Positioned at the mid-point of three levels, he looks upward toward a summoning chalice atop the rock and a descending angel brandishing a cross.²⁴ The reminding angel, the raised cross, the beckoning cup are not all present in *The Conspiracy*, but the medieval populace, familiar with these suggestive iconographic images, look upward as well: anticipating Christ's transcendence over the weaknesses of all flesh.

Peter Travis contends that Towneley's Agony in the Garden is tinged with pathos because the dramatist conveys Christ's doubts, whereas the Chester audience would have been assured of Christ's divinity.²⁵ However, as Lynn White points out, frequent dramatization of the Gethsemane scene in the late

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Middle Ages indicates a general sympathy with the emotion of doubt.²⁶ In spatial sense we can envision Christ's spirit being directed upward toward his father, yet his flesh being held downward toward the earth. Whereas Christ kneels in prayer on the pageant wagon, his disciples remain at its foot; and Trinitas speaks from a castle-like heaven built upon the pageant.²⁷ Through the gesture of prayer, Christ displays a submissive, bowed posture that is less affirmative than his authoritative stance of washing the disciples' feet. Aligning himself with *the opus Dei* is painful; indeed his flesh recoils from anticipated death. Visually the sight of the disciples lapsing into sleep, united in postlapsarian weakness, suggests stupefaction. Christ is drawn in two directions: upward toward his Father and downward toward fallen man; thus his work seems demonstrably agonizing. This struggle is particularly intensified by the Towneley dramatist's use of Trinitas, whose entrance is delayed until Christ's thrice-uttered prayer to his Father. In contrast, the biblical account in Luke describes an angel descending to him upon the first prayer, thereby fortifying him.

As I have attempted to show, in representative scenes of his ministry and Passion, Christ can be seen as a worker. Although in the eternal sense, Christ's work is ongoing, in a representational sense his work is manifested concretely through the actions he performs in medieval drama. Certainly it is through the work that we know the worker.²⁸ As exemplified in Christ, who is part God-part man, work cannot be easily dichotomized as either God's work or man's work. But in the sense of Christ's being a worker-exemplar, one recognizable aspect of his stage presence in Towneley, he provides a model for contemporary work that fifteenth-century audiences, burdened with ambivalent attitudes toward work promulgated in the pulpit and in the workplace, might have resolved through Christ's example.

Notes

1. Robert Potter, "The Unity of Medieval Drama," in *Contexts for Early English Drama* eds. Marianne G. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey (Bloomington:Indiana University Press, 1989), 46.
2. David Fowler, *The Bible in Middle English Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 127. Fowler states that the Bible casts Christ in diverse roles and refers to him in multiple ways.
3. Peter Travis, "The Social Body of the Dramatic Christ in Medieval England," in *Early Drama to 1600*,ed. Albert H. Tricomi, Acta 13 (Binghamton: State University of New York, 1987), 18.
4. Edwin G. Kaiser, C.P.P.S., *Theology of Work* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1966), 47. Kaiser sees Adam's work after the fall as being essentially the same as his work before the fall. However, compare Genesis 2:15, where God places Adam in the garden "to dress it and to keep it" with Genesis 3:17-19, where thorns and thistles infiltrate the garden.
5. Peter Schoonenberg, S.J., *God's World In The Making*, Duquesne Studies: Theology Series 2 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1964), 150- 153.
6. David Meakin, *Man and Work: Literature and Culture in Industrial Society* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1976), 3.
7. Arnold Pacey, *The Culture of Technology* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), 173.
8. George Ovitt, Jr., *The Restoration of Perfection: Labor and Technology in Medieval Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 90-106.
9. Lynn White, Jr., "Medieval Engineering and the Sociology of Knowledge," *Pacific Historical Review* 44 (1975), 1-21, reprinted in *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays* (Berkeley:University of California Press, 1978), 331.
10. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Pardoner's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*,ed. F. N. Robinson, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), Prologue, ll. 444-45. I thank Allen J. Frantzen for this reference.
11. Jacques LeGoff, *Time, Work, & Culture in the Middle Ages*,trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 117-118.
12. G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), 555.

13. John Gardner, *The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), 1 10.
14. All textual references are to George England and Alfred W. Pollard, eds., *The Conspiracy, in The Towneley Plays*, Early English Text Society ES 71 (London: Oxford University Press, 1897).

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15. Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 233-234.
16. Peter Travis, *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 175.
17. Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 157.
18. Pamela Sheingom, "The Visual Language of Drama," in *Contexts for Early English Drama*, eds. Marianne G. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 174.
19. Theodore K. Lerud, *Social and Political Dimensions of the Drama* (New York: Garland, 1988), 139-140.
20. Hans Kurath, ed., *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1954), E-F: 169-170.
21. For an example of discrimination against workers whose hands became dirty ("blue-nails"), see Gerald A. J. Hodgett, "Industry in the Middle Ages: Textiles," *A Social and Economic History of Medieval Europe* (London: Methuen, 1972), 139-140.
22. Woolf, 236.
23. *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans. and ed. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961)
321. This information and quotation are offered by Clifford Davidson, "Space and Time in Medieval Drama: Meditations on Orientation in the Early Theater," *Word, Picture, and Spectacle*, ed. Clifford Davidson, EDAM Monograph Series 5 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1984), 51.
24. Richard S. Field, *Fifteenth Century Woodcuts and Metalcuts* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, n.d.), plates 33-36.
25. Travis, *Dramatic Design*, 146-147.
26. Lynn White, Jr., "Natural Science and Naturalistic Art in the Middle Ages," *American Historical Review* 52 (1947), 421-435, reprinted in *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 33, n. 21.
27. Martial Rose, ed., *The Wakefield Mystery Plays* (New York: Norton, 1961), 418.
28. Ovitt, 62 and 215, n. 17. Ovitt is referring to Ambrose's statements in his *Hexaameron*, homily I, 8, 31.