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THE QUESTION OF "TYPOLOGY" AND
THE WAKEFIELD *MACTACIO ABEL*

Recent studies of medieval mystery plays have demonstrated a growing interest in what is called "typology," conceived as a discipline in which Old Testament events are "figures" or "types" of events in the New Testament. The learned and convincing article by Rosemary Woolf, "The Effect of Typology on the English Mediaeval Plays of Abraham and Isaac"¹ did much to stimulate interest in the subject; V. A. Kolve sought to show the relevance of "typological" considerations to the general structure of the dramatic cycles;² and in her recent book Miss Woolf has been careful to keep before us the "typological" relationships suggested by the plays.³ With reference to "typology" generally, Miss Woolf, whose acquaintance with the subject in the visual arts is impressive, observed that knowledge of the significance of "types" was not recondite in late medieval England, and that, indeed, it formed a part of "the small stock of knowledge which the common people might be expected to have received."⁴ In the hierarchical society of the time we may suspect that the plays were heard by persons of some responsibility, including masters of shops, merchants, rectors of parishes and their clerks, municipal and manorial officials, and even by local magnates and their followers, as well as by servants, apprentices

¹*Speculum* 22 (1957) 805-825.

²*The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, 1966) Chapter IV.

³*The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972). Like her earlier work on the lyric, *English Religious Lyrics in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1968), this book must be ranked as a major contribution to English medieval studies.

⁴"The Effect of Typology," p. 825.

so that the nature of this sacrifice would have been obvious even to the illiterate. The picture is thus spaceless and timeless except in the sense that its space and time are the space of any Christian at any time he attends Mass. The "mystery" of the picture implies a relevance to the "personal conversion and life of the Christian."

TROPOLOGY

The word for this phenomenon most commonly used was "tropology," and its effect, which is far more important than the term, is to make events in both the Old and New Testaments immediately and practically relevant to the daily life of the observer. If Old Testament events are to be significant in this way, however, they must be, so to speak, "Christianized," or made relevant through their New Testament fulfillment. The burden of Isaac seen as the burden of the Cross is a forceful reminder that every Christian must also engage in self-sacrifice, setting aside the inclinations of the flesh inherited from the Fall (or the Old Man) in obedience to the New Law, which demands that every man not only love God, but love his neighbor as himself. In short, the juxtaposition of types and antitypes implies tropology,⁶ a fact that is suggested in most representations by dressing the Old Testament figures in contemporary medieval costumes. Tropology releases Scriptural events from the limits of space and time and makes them perennial. There is nothing especially obscure or recondite about this sort of implication, for it was ingrained by centuries of Scriptural exposition. Thus St. Gregory, whose example as an expositor in the late Middle Ages was equalled only by that of St. Augustine, hastened over the "allegorical" sense in his expositions of the Gospels to arrive at the wider implications of tropology.⁷ We should understand, however, that the "allegorical" sense which gives instruction in the faith is a necessary intervening step if the "tropological" sense is to be anything more than a simple moral lesson readily discernible from the history. In connection with the Old Testament, St. Gregory explained, "Audivimus ex historia, quod miremur; cognovimus ex capite, quod credamus; consideremus nunc ex corpore, quod vivendo teneamus. In nobismetipsis namque debemus transformare quod legimus."⁸ The tropological sense proper is a moral or practical meaning vivified through faith in Christ and

⁶ Cf. the present author's *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1962) pp. 189-190.

⁷ *Exégèse médiévale* 1, 551.

⁸ Quoted from the *Moralia*, *ibid.*, 555.

membership in the Church. As Henri de Lubac says, "C'est par le sens tropologique ainsi compris que l'Écriture est pleinement *pour nous* la Parole de Dieu, cette parole qui s'adresse à chacun, *hic et nunc*, aussi bien qu'à toute l'Église, et disant à chacun 'ce qui intéresse sa vie.'"⁹

The early Gothic Nativity scene to which we have called attention gradually changed during the course of the late Middle Ages: its figures became more "human" in appearance and attitude, and the spaceless gold leaf backgrounds were replaced by scenes shown in crude perspective. By the fifteenth century the church interior had frequently been supplanted by a small shed, sometimes with a ruined roof. The trend is sometimes lamented. Thus Emile Mâle wrote, "We have far to go from this majestic conception, wholly theological in its grandeur, to the picturesque crèches which appear at the beginning of the fifteenth century and mark the end of great religious art."¹⁰ What happened is usually described as an "increasing realism," although the word *realism* is perhaps best confined to Courbet and his successors, who not only heralded it as a new concept, but lent it connotations inappropriate to the study of medieval and Renaissance art. In any event, the developing style involved greater verisimilitude in a contemporary rather than in an historical sense. That is, figures from the past were treated as though they were contemporaries of the observer and not as historical figures from an earlier era. The verisimilitude was accompanied by a new appeal to feeling that manifested itself first in Italy, inspired by the evangelical movements of the later Middle Ages, especially by the Franciscans. I have elsewhere sought to characterize this development in the arts not as "realism," but as "increasingly detailed exemplification" whose function was not to distract the observer from the "theological grandeur" of the subjects treated in ecclesiastical art, but to make their implications more immediate in the life of the observer.¹¹ Where "tropological" implications are left largely to the understanding in Romanesque and early Gothic art, late medieval and Renaissance artists sought to emphasize the "*hic et nunc*" of spiritual understanding by means of an increasingly localized verisimilitude. The artist, in other words, gave to the "airy nothings," or implied principles of early Gothic art a local habitation and a name. Where Scriptural materials are concerned, verisimilitude serves as a means of making tropological impli-

⁹ *Ibid.*, 566.

¹⁰ *Religious Art* (New York, 1949) p. 78.

¹¹ *A Preface to Chaucer*, Ch. III.

cations more forceful and explicit. A certain "universality" is sacrificed for the sake of immediacy with reference to a particular audience, perhaps somewhat more inclusive and less well educated than that addressed in earlier art.

The plays of the Wakefield Master afford excellent examples of tropological elaboration of Scriptural narrative, and they bear unmistakable signs that this is indeed their intended function. If we assume that the actual subjects of their narratives are not a series of Scriptural events *per se*, but rather a series of very significant events perennially recurring by virtue of their Scriptural authority, described in terms of the daily life of Wakefield at the time of the presentation, we shall find them much easier to understand. The "characters" in the plays are often in effect the spectators themselves, most of them easily recognizable because of the author's skill at local verisimilitude; and the events these characters experience, although they are structured in patterns provided by the Scriptures, are events familiar to the audience in the practical conduct of their affairs. A full study of the plays would thus involve a careful examination of social conditions in England during the first half of the fifteenth century; however, some of the problems suggested by the plays may be examined without this more detailed analysis.

ANACHRONISMS

For example, the "anachronisms" that appear with special frequency in the plays of the Wakefield Master represent essentially the same technique that places the newly born Christ child upon an altar within a church in early Gothic Nativities. As Kolve points out, the settings and costumes were probably "contemporary" in all of the mystery plays,¹² but the Wakefield plays contain a large number of verbal anachronisms as well. Kolve's explanation involves the common medieval concept of the exemplary character of history and the contention that the events described were intended to be understood from the perspective of eternity rather than from the limited perspective of human temporality.¹³ Both concepts are relevant, but they do not, as Kolve realizes, fully account for the peculiarities of the plays. It is true that the past, to use St. Augustine's words in the *De doctrina Christiana* (2. 28. 44), was said to belong "to the order of time, whose creator and administrator is God," so that past history was thought to contain useful

¹² *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 106.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-110; 116-122.

examples illustrating the operation of Divine Providence. A sharp distinction was made, however, between the historical time of the Old Law and that of the New, so that "examples" under the Old Law had to be treated with circumspection.¹⁴ But this distinction becomes blurred in the spiritual life of the individual. Although it is true that every Christian formally puts off the "Old Man" who lives "by the law" at baptism (Rom vi.3-6), most nevertheless lapse (Gal iv.17-24), failing to strip themselves of "the Old Man and his deeds" (Col iii.5f.). Hence there is, even under the New Law, something of the Synagogue as well as of the Church in every man.¹⁵ The "anachronisms" in the plays, which keep the time of the New Law before us, are thus indicative of the fact that the author's concern was not with "history" as such, but with the spiritual life of his own contemporaries. The anachronisms provide, moreover, a means of avoiding the embarrassment of Old Law "examples" taken literally. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that Old Law attitudes, among which were considered to be vanity, selfishness and malice, together with a general blindness to the Order of Providence, were regarded in the late Middle Ages as the primary sources of what we should call social disorder, oppression and tyranny. The complaints of the shepherds at the opening of *Secunda pastorum* are essentially complaints about the reign of the Old Law, with its attendant inversions, in contemporary society. If we can recognize the fact that the real subject of the plays is the spiritual life of the audience, the anachronisms as well as inconsistencies in literal geography, like the distance between Wakefield and the scene of the Nativity, disappear.

Kolve's second argument concerns the distinction between time, which is a feature of creation, and the timeless eternity of Heaven. In accordance with a tradition stemming from Plato's *Timaeus* (37-38), time is "the image of eternity." In the Middle Ages this image could be seen in two ways. First, the cyclical character of temporal succession on earth obvious not only in seasons, months and days, but also in the more or less regular "life-span" of all temporal things, was regarded as proof that time is a reflection of an immutable realm. This is the idea expressed in Theseus' great speech on the death of Arcite in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*:

¹⁴ Cf. *A Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 325-326.

¹⁵ Cf. the present author's *The Literature of Medieval England* (New York, 1970) pp. 3-4.

"That same prince, and that moevere," quod he,
 "Hath stablised in this wretched world adoun
 Certayn dayes and duracioun
 To al that is engendred in this place,
 Over the whiche day they may nat pace,
 Al mowe they yet tho dayes wel abregge . . .
 For it is preved by experience,
 But that me list declaren my sentence:
 Than may men by this ordre wel discerne,
 That thilke moevere stable is and eterne."

But this argument is not a derogation of present time, for, as William of Conches explained in the twelfth century, "Duobus modis tempus imitatur evum: vel quia per successiones continet omnia que evum simul, vel in ea parte que presens est, ut ait Boethius: in ea enim sola simile est eternitati."¹⁶ The reference is to the final prose in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which probably owes something to the discussion of time in the eleventh book of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. There it is explained that for the human mind "the past" is but a memory of the past in the present, and that "the future" is an expectation of the future in the present, so that only the present may be said to exist in the temporal world. But for God the past, the present and the future as we see them constitute a simultaneous present. This consideration leads St. Augustine to a recognition of his own limitations and of the overwhelming majesty of God. Boethius has his Lady Philosophy say, "Atqui si est diuini humanique praesentis digni collatio, uti uos uestro hoc temporario praesenti quaedam uidetis, ita ille omnia suo cernit aeterno." She goes on to explain that God's vision violates neither man's freedom of choice nor his responsibility, conferring on him instead a "necessity for probity," since the Supreme Judge sees everything. That is, the recognition of eternity, which may be inferred from the cyclic character of temporal successions, imposes an obligation on everyone to use the little present of his own world well. To return to the plays, we may conclude that their relevance arises from their bearing on the present seen as a manifestation of events perennially recurring not in literal space and time but within the human heart.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Glossae super Platonem*, ed. É. Jeuneau (Paris, 1965) p. 180.

¹⁷ We may compare, if we wish, the underlying attitude here with modern structuralist depth analysis, which seeks to discover the deep structures of the human personality and the recurrent structures of human behavior, thought and

The tropological emphasis in the plays not only accounts for their anachronisms and spatial inconsistencies; it also explains what appear to be inconsistencies in their narrative development. To cite the single most celebrated example, *Secunda pastorum* is usually said to fall into "two parts" not altogether consistent in theme; but this incoherence disappears if the subject is seen to be not the actual but the perennial discovery of Christ, with special reference, it is true, to shepherds and to pastors of souls, the latter being suggested by the figurative meaning of "shepherds." But the lesson applies to anyone. When the shepherds, under the inspiration of the "youth" among them who shows from the outset glimmerings of wisdom, and whose charitable impulse leads to the discovery of the stolen sheep, are led to perform an act of mercy, substituting a toss in a blanket for the legal death penalty for stealing sheep after Mak has shown repentance (lines 622-623), they have, in effect, implemented the New Law and are thus in a position to discover Christ. The third shepherd's response to Mary's injunction, "Tell furth as ye go," reveals the "time" of the action: "Forsothe, allredy it semys to be told / Full oft." The message of charity, in which the tempering of justice with mercy to the penitent is not only the essence of the Redemption but a common practical application, is often told but seldom heeded. Its reward is a tropological Nativity with all the joys therein implied. Viewed in this way, the play does have a consistent thematic development unmarred by "two separate parts."¹⁸ Moreover, the comic aspect of the behavior of the unconverted shepherds is entirely consistent with the medieval habit of finding irrational (or sinful) conduct laughable.

WAKEFIELD ABEL

These principles may be illustrated further in a more careful examination that result from them. The idea appeared, for example, in Vilfredo Pareto's "residues" and "derivations," although it has been refined and elaborated in recent years and has led to a great deal of pedantic "analysis" of literary texts. It often leads to a kind of cultural "anthropomorphism" based on current conditions, to sentimental neo-primitivism, and to generalizations about the past that ignore the elementary facts of cultural history. Those who would dismiss the subject of tropology as "mysticism" in a derogatory sense should recall that its aims were operational. Structuralism is not only "mystical" in its assumptions, but is operationally inconsequential, a fact that may account for its academic popularity.

¹⁸ Cf. *A Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 301-302.

tion of the first of the Wakefield plays, *Mactacio Abel*,¹⁹ sometimes regarded by modern critics as a play in which the "religious element" is slighted in favor of dramatic sympathy for Cain's rebelliousness. The play opens with a speech that calls attention forcibly to its tropological relevance. Garcio (or Pikeharnes) greets the audience with some obscene injunctions to silence (lines 6-7), and observes to the audience concerning his master, Cain, "Som of you are his men." This does not mean, of course, that some of them are plowmen,²⁰ but that they belong to what St. Augustine called "the generation of Cain," analogous with the Pauline "sons of Ishmael," made up of all those who live "according to the flesh" rather than "according to God."²¹ Human beings are all sinners, but some show a kind of dedication to worldliness, and these are the "men" of Cain. Although some members of the audience may have been unfamiliar with this concept, the character of Cain in the play is sufficiently vivid to make its implications clear.

When Cain himself enters, he is driving a large mixed team that refuses to obey him. The team may be a reflection of Deut. xxii.10, "Thou shalt not plough with an ox and an ass together," which means, according to the *Glossa ordinaria*, "In bove et asino arat, qui recipit Evangelia cum Judaeorum observantia, quae praecessit in umbra."²² However, such mixed teams of eight were commonly used for plowing large areas, and the implication may be either that Cain enjoyed a large holding, or that he was setting out to work on his lord's demesne. But we soon find Cain referring to Christ, although he maintains an Old Law attitude himself, so that he is clearly not an historical Cain but a perennial Cain. The disobedience of the animals is a clear indication that he has not subdued himself. In Gen. i.26-30 God gave men "dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air and the beasts," a gift repeated in Gen. ix.1-2 to "Noe and his sons." In connection with these passages, John of Salisbury explains, "Cum uero primum sit excutiendus sensus historicus quicumque animum uel ad fidem uel ad opera fidei, quae sunt boni mores, magis informat, laudabilior et plane utilior est."

¹⁹ The text followed is that of A. C. Cawley, *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* (Manchester, 1958).

²⁰ Cf. Muriel Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (New York, 1949) p. 241, where Chaucer's Plowman, by virtue of his trade, is called "a descendant of 'Caim.'"

²¹ *De civ. Dei*, 15. 1-2.

²² *PL*, 113. 476 A. Cf. David Lyle Jeffrey "Stewardship in the Wakefield *Mactacio Abel* and *Noe Plays*" *ABR* 22 (1971) 69.

In the present instance, "cum in se ipso homo subiecerit, dominium suique aliorumque consequitur."²³ As Bishop Brinton put it in the fourteenth century, "just as man serves God, his superior, the earth and the elements ought to serve man, their superior." But when men are slothful, or derelict in the service they owe God, they lose control over those things below them, so that they become injurious.²⁴ The idea was commonplace; it appears, for example, in Shakespeare's *Othello*, where that worthy remarks,

every puny whipster gets my sword,
But why should honor outlive honesty? (V, ii).

Even Cain's boy refuses to serve him, striking back at his master and commanding the team to "let the plough stand" (line 56). Cain's slothfulness in a spiritual sense and his lack of success with "the earth" in spite of his determined worldly wisdom are evident in the remainder of the play. When we first meet him he is already a victim of the curse (Gen iv.12) "When thou shalt till it, it shall not yield to thee its fruit." This fact is not anticipation of things to come, but another indication that Cain as we see him in the play is not a literal historical figure.

When Abel enters with a friendly and charitable greeting, Cain replies with the remark that he should have waited until he was called, commands him to help with the plow, and interlards these uncivil greetings with obscenities—"Com kys myne ars!" "kys the divillis toute!" and "Go grese thi shepe vnder the toute / For that is the moste lefe!" The "typology" of this play refers us to the Crucifixion, but the "crucifixion" of Abel does not simply "correspond" mechanically with the Crucifixion of Christ; it is, rather, the Crucifixion by "the World" of all those who earnestly seek to follow Christ. Cain's malice toward his brother is presented in local terms because the concern of the author was with the plight of the Cains and Abels in his audience, not with historical events for their own sake. Abel does not return malice for malice, a fact that considerably reduces the "dramatic" quality of the play from a modern point of view. Instead he patiently explains that both owe God a sacrifice. In fifteenth-century terms, "tithing" is one outward manifestation of this sacrifice, but it is merely an outward compliance, useless unless made in the proper spirit. The *Glossa ordinaria*, quoting

²³ *Policrat.*, 7. 10. 659 a-b. Cf. Jeffrey, p. 69.

²⁴ Cited in the present author's *Chaucer's London* (New York, 1968) p. 67.

Isidore of Seville, explains in conjunction with Genesis iv.3-4 that "justus in omnibus quae agit per fidem et charitatem (de quibus caeterae virtutes oriuntur, et sine quibus nihil possunt) Deo placere contendit, quod significatur in adipibus oblatis."²⁵ No reference is made to the "fat" offered by Abel in the play, since its significance would probably have escaped the audience, but Abel is given a consistently faithful and charitable attitude. Every Christian was thought to have an obligation to "pay what he owes." Thus in *Piers Plowman* (B XIX, 177-182) Christ taught Dobest, giving God's priesthood, or Piers, the power to assail on one condition:

Dobest he taughte,
 And gaf Pieres power and pardoun he graunted
 To alle manere men mercy and forgyfnes,
 Hym mygte men to assoile of alle manere synnes,
 In couenant that thei come and knoleche to paye
 To Pieres pardon the Plowman *redde quod debes.*

The Latin tag is a reference to the parable of the servant in Matthew xviii.23-35, where Christ promises strict justice to the uncharitable: "So also shall my heavenly Father do to you, if you forgive not every one his brother from your hearts." This is the debt owed, and the prerequisite for pardon under the New Law. The Wakefield author keeps his characters consistent with this idea. If Cain is, actually, a thoroughgoing citizen of "the earth," familiar in every community, Abel is the faithful and charitable man. Their use in this way is fully justified in the *Glossa ordinaria*:

Cain et Abel de una matregeniti, figura sunt omnium hominum qui de radice peccati in hanc vitam propagantur; et alii terrenam ciuitatem et mortiferas delicias sunt amaturi, et quantum in se est ambitione possessuri; quos significat Cain, qui interpretatur *possessio*. Alii futuram civitatem quaesuri, et de hujus habitationis miseriis lugentes, ad futuram gloriam toto desiderio transituri, quos significat Abel, qui interpretatur *luctus*²⁶

The two cities grow up "mixed" in the human heart, as St. Augustine explains,²⁷ so that there is something of Cain and something of Abel in every Christian, or, in every member of the play's audience. It may

²⁵ PL 113. 98 C.

²⁶ PL 113. 98 A-B. The word *figura*, which, in spite of modern efforts to sophisticate it, was a very general term, is here used to refer to members of the Church Militant and not simply to the New Testament.

²⁷ *Enn. in Ps.*, 64. 2.

be objected that the audience had not read the *Glossa ordinaria*, which was beyond their "small stock of knowledge." That may be, but the play is clearly intended to add its lessons to that stock of knowledge by elaborating them in its words and actions.

Thus Abel's concern for "future glory" is immediately revealed in his reply to Cain's obscenities:

And therfor, brother, let vs weynd,
 And first clens us from the feynd,
 Or we make sacrifice:
 Then blis withoutten end
 Get we for oure seruyce,
 Of him that is oure saulis leche (78-83).

Lines 79-80 suggest the penance or self-sacrifice necessary to charitable action, the "ancient sacrifice" of "an humble and a contrite heart"; and the expression "oure saulis leche" is a clear allusion to Christ. But Cain compares this advice with the preaching of a hypocritical friar—"let furth your geysse; the fox will preche" (line 84),²⁸ engages in a further obscenity,²⁹ and reveals a reluctance to leave his plow for the sake of God, from whom, he says, he gets only "soro and wo." In spite of Abel's assurance, "God giffys the all thi lifyng," Cain refuses to understand. He has, he says, paid his tithes—"My farthyng is in the preest hand"—although the obvious possibility of wordplay on "farthyng"³⁰ casts some doubt on the spirit of his payment. He is reluctant to sacrifice because his "wynnyngys" are "meyn," and he has no confidence that Christ ("him that me dere boght") will lend him anything. Cain can think only in terms of material things, and he refuses to understand that even those material things he has are, as Abel explains, "bot a lone." God, he thinks, has always been his "fo," so that his fields do not prosper like those of other men, and he has no desire to give his precious possessions either to God or to any man (lines 134f.). The author makes Cain's preoccupation with *possessiones* unmistakable, as well as the frustration that accompanies this preoccupation.

²⁸ For the figure in the visual arts, see M. D. Anderson, *Misericords* (Harmondsworth, 1954), pp. 21-22; and in popular verse, see "The False Fox" printed by R. H. Robbins, *Secular Lyrics of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Oxford, 1952) no. 49, especially lines 13-14.

²⁹ The word "hay" in line 88 probably implies "flesh."

³⁰ Cf. Chaucer, "Summoner's Tale," III (D), 1967 and the subsequent problem.

Cain's denial of brotherly love becomes overt in lines 159-166, and this, as we have seen, is what his unsatisfactory sacrifice implies.

THE COMIC

The comic scene in which Cain counts out his offering probably had its inspiration in the text of Genesis in the Latin version used by St. Augustine, Isidore of Seville, and, because of the latter, reflected in the *Glossa ordinaria*. The Vulgate version of Genesis iv.6-7 in the Douay translation reads in part: "And the Lord said to him, Why art thou angry? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou do well, shall thou not receive? but if ill, shall not sin forth with be present at the door?" In the earlier version, which I quote as it appears in the Dods translation of *The City of God* (XV, vii), we find instead: "And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth, and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou offerest rightly, but dost not rightly distinguish, hast thou not sinned?" St. Augustine explains that although the sacrifice is made "rightly" to the true God, Cain may be said to fail to distinguish because he follows his own will instead of God's in making his offering. The *Glossa ordinaria* adds from Isidore, "Si recte offeras, et non recte divides, peccasti: quia antea Judaei recte illa offerebant, in eo rei sunt quia novum Testamentum a veteri non distinxerunt." In order to make Cain's failure to distinguish between Old Law selfish malice and the charity of the New Law clear, the playwright has him carefully select an inferior sheaf for God while keeping the better nine for himself. Almost everyone sometimes falls into the same error, whether in actual tithing or in daily affairs, and some, like Cain, pursue it with vigor. The play's exploitation of the possible wordplay in "non recte divides" by making the action a deliberate "dividing up" must have delighted the clerks in the audience, while the layfolk were undoubtedly amused by Cain's foolishness.⁸¹ When Cain begins "dividing" the second group of ten sheaves, he shuts his eyes, claiming that he can thus "doy no wrong" (lines 225-228). The theme of "spiritual blindness," which was common in the visual arts⁸² as well as in literature,⁸³ and was often associated with the Synagogue or the Old Law, vividly

⁸¹ As I have pointed out elsewhere, irrational or sinful behavior was often regarded as being comic in the Middle Ages. See *Abelard and Heloise* (New York, 1972) pp. 110-112. This kind of comedy often appears in "religious" contexts.

⁸² See Erwin Panofsky, "Blind Cupid," in *Studies in Iconology* (New York, 1962) pp. 95-128; M. D. Anderson, *Misericords*, p. 18.

⁸³ E. g., Chaucer, "Second Nun's Tale," VIII (G), 488-504.

reinforces the character of Cain's offering. It accounts for his attitude toward God, whom he regards in purely materialistic terms. He will not, he says, offer him any more than the one poor sheaf he has supplied, not even enough to "wipe his ars withall" (line 238). When he finally releases a second sheaf, having selected a poor one and remarked that he will give no more even though God may become his enemy (261-262), he finds that his offering stinks "like the dwill in hell" (283), as, indeed, it should, since it is offered in malice rather than in love.

This behavior is accompanied by a superstitious fear of God, which has, rather oddly, won him the admiration of certain modern critics. For when God addresses him, reprimanding him for his attitude toward Abel, which constitutes the real nature of his "tithing," he responds by calling Him a "hob ouer the wall," and expresses a determination to hide: "On land then will I flyt." The ambition to hide from God, which once motivated Adam and Eve, is, of course, foolish, and is in this instance, where God is reduced to a mere hobgoblin, laughable. Sustained malice implies a self-imposed exile from one's fellow men, but hardly a means of escape from that ultimate justice promised in Matthew xviii.35. Hate is also a kind of murder in accordance with 1 John iii.15: "whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer."⁸⁴ The murder of Abel in the play not only exemplifies this idea; it also illustrates a fate that those who follow Abel may suffer either literally or daily at the hands of the malicious. For his part, Cain is condemned to walk in fear of his neighbors and looks forward to an early burial "in Gudeboure at the quarell hede"; but this easy escape is denied him. In despair, like his Scriptural predecessor, he blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, denying that a request for mercy would help him:

It is no boyte mercy to crave,
For I do, I mon none haue.⁸⁵

As an exemplar of worldliness, Cain cannot seek the mercy available to the penitent; he must seek a worldly solution to his problem.

⁸⁴ The principle was well-known. Cf. Chaucer, "Parson's Tale," X (I), 564. The parallel with "Summoner's Tale," III (D), 2009-2010, indicated in Robinson's note is, however, false, since the latter passage is literal.

⁸⁵ Cf. *Glossa ordinaria*, PL 113. 99 D: "Peccata peccatis adjiciens desperat, nec credit se veniam posse adipisci, quod est blasphemia in Spiritum sanctum, quae non remittitur in hoc saeculo nec in futuro." This principle was conventionally explained by confessors to their penitents, so that it would not have escaped even the unlearned in the audience.

That solution is the one personified in the *Roman de la rose* as Bien Celer. Cain asks his boy to hide the corpse, but Pikeharnes, with his usual obedience, refuses to cooperate, expressing a fear of the bailiffs. There follows a comic scene which probably owes its contemporary relevance to the fact that murderers at the time, after being arrested by the bailiffs and jailed by the sheriff, were turned over to the local justice of the peace and his court. With unfortunate regularity such cases were referred to the King's Bench, which, also with unfortunate regularity, supplied pardons for the offenders.³⁶ In any event, Cain seeks to proclaim his innocence "in the kyngys nayme," while Pikeharnes simultaneously proclaims his guilt. Having eluded his master's wrath, Pikeharnes then warns the audience that they shall have the same blessing from God that Cain had. At the close of the play Cain recognizes that his place is with Satan and once more decides to hide, becoming "a fugitive and a vagabond . . . upon the earth" whose fate serves as a warning to those who substitute selfish malice for the debt of brotherly love they owe to God. In fifteenth-century England Cain's exile was a far more serious matter than it might be today in the anonymous societies of our great cities. As some of the modern critics of this play have demonstrated, the malicious are in any event now treated with considerable sympathy. England was then in this respect more like the America described by Tocqueville: "In Europe, a criminal is an unhappy man who is struggling for his life against the agents of power, while the people are merely a spectator of the conflict; in America he is looked upon as the enemy of the human race, and the whole of mankind is against him." The small, tightly-knit communities of the fifteenth century, like some small communities in the south of Europe today, had small tolerance for criminals.

Far from neglecting the "religious element" in his material, or "secularizing" it, or moderating it by introducing distracting comic elements, the playwright has done his best to make the spiritual significance of his narrative immediately available to the audience before him in terms that they could readily understand. Too often today we regard what medieval men thought of as "the spiritual significance" of the Scriptural narrative as being something mystical, airy and highly theoretical. On the contrary, it was eminently practical. But the technique of the Wakefield Master has nothing in common with nineteenth-century

³⁶ See Bertha Haven Putnam, *Proceedings Before the Justices of the Peace in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (London, 1938) p. cxxviii.

"realism" whose social message was based on abstract political principles. Since the technique of the play was employed in a great deal of late medieval and Renaissance art, we should seek a more fitting term for it than *realism*. It was, in fact, a kind of tropological verisimilitude. With regard to the "social criticism" in the Wakefield plays, we should notice that it is directed against the malicious (or men of Cain) regardless of social rank. There are in the plays reflections of contemporary abuses, like the activities of royal purveyors, or, perhaps, the laxity of the King's Bench, or the blindness of ecclesiastical courts, but the criticism is essentially moral criticism to which all ranks in society are subjected. Cain is not pictured as a member of an oppressive aristocracy, and in *Secunda Pastorum* the first shepherd treats his servant, the third shepherd, with a tyranny not unlike that under which he himself suffers. Herod, the exemplification of Old Law tyranny, rules everywhere, attacking the hundred and forty-four thousand of Apocalypse xiv.3-4 (*Magnus Herodes*, lines 487-489), who are the innocent, in guises of great variety, even in "Kemptowne." And the judgments of Caiphas the Bishop and Annas the Archdeacon in their ecclesiastical court reflect the judgments of the worldly everywhere, who can always find "tortores" or summoners to assist them. The author of the plays leaves his audience with the possibility of finding these characters in themselves and among their fellows, men whose "subjects" may range from communicants, citizens in towns, workers in shops and fields, to a wife and a brood of children. As M. H. Keen so aptly states it, "We shall deceive ourselves if we think of late medieval England in modern terms, with . . . social tensions centring round the competing interests of classes divided horizontally from one another."³⁷ The "common people" who witnessed the plays were not a homogeneous mass; they lived in small vertically structured communities. The spiritual message directed to them in the plays was a matter of practical concern to each of them, for under these circumstances malice could disrupt any hierarchy, bring tyranny to any small group, and isolate any man who failed in that love celebrated in the feast of Corpus Christi. In their skillful use of detailed verisimilitude for the development of traditional ideas these plays are comparable with the paintings of the great Netherlandish masters of the same century. We should, I think, respect them accordingly.

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³⁷ *England in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1973) p. 31.