

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL AND TEXTUAL PROBLEMS OF THE ENGLISH MIRACLE CYCLES.

IV.—LUDUS COVENTRIAE.

THE cycle of miracle plays preserved in a Cottonian manuscript, and known commonly as the 'Ludus Coventriae,' is one of the chief puzzles of our early dramatic literature.¹ The name under which it passes is unfortunate, for one of the few things concerning it of which we can feel tolerably certain is that it has no connexion with Coventry. The person responsible for the error is Cotton's librarian, Richard James, who in the earlier part of the seventeenth century wrote the following description in the beginning of the manuscript: 'Contenta Novi Testamenti scenice expressa et actitata olim per monachos sive fratres mendicantes: vulgo dicitur hic liber Ludus Coventriae, sive ludus Corporis Christi: scribitur metris Anglicanis.' It has not unnaturally been supposed that James based his note upon some tradition which reached him along with the manuscript itself.² There is, how-

¹ British Museum, Cottonian MS., Vesp. D. viii. The best account of the problem is that given by E. K. Chambers, 'Mediaeval Stage,' ii. 419, to which I am much indebted.

² Presumably from Robert Hegge of Durham, author of 'The Legend of St. Cuthbert,' who has left his name in the manuscript, and who, like James, was a member of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. The cycle is consequently sometimes known by the not very happy name of the Hegge Plays.

ever, no sufficient reason to suppose that this was the case. The manuscript already bore, in an Elizabethan hand, the title, 'The plaie called Corpus Christi,' and the Coventry miracles were by far the most famous Corpus Christi plays in England. It will be noticed how James uses the terms 'Ludus Coventriae' and 'Ludus Corporis Christi' as though they were synonymous. His value as a witness is not enhanced by his describing the collection as confined to the New Testament, a limitation which applies to the Coventry guild-plays, but not to the collection in question. Moreover, the Coventry Greyfriars' plays, which it is clear James had in mind, are almost certainly an invention of seventeenth century antiquaries. Lastly, not only is the manuscript clearly the work of an East-Anglian scribe, but, as Herr Kramer has shown, the dialect of the plays themselves bears no relation to that of Coventry, being of a much more easterly type.¹ We must, therefore, give up the Coventry legend altogether. The only suggestion of a locality in the plays themselves is the tantalising announcement in the prologue that

A Sunday next, yf that we may,
At six of the belle we gynne oure play
In N towne,

¹ Max Kramer, 'Sprache und Heimat des sogen. Ludus Coventriae,' 1892. His conclusions are on pp. 68-9. He believes in a rather problematical 'urheimat im südlichsten ostmittellande,' possibly Wiltshire, but agrees that in its present form the cycle 'dem nördlichen ostmittellande angehöre.' He also thinks 'dass die aufzeichnung im norden stattgefunden hat,' which seems questionable.

which most probably indicates a variable locality. I shall, therefore, speak of the cycle as the N-town plays.¹

The manuscript was edited for the Shakespeare Society by J. O. Halliwell in 1841. Judged by the standards of the middle of last century the edition is commendably accurate. If it falls short of modern requirements it is less through errors in the text—though indeed these are not rare—than in that it hardly reflects at all the extraordinary confusion of the original manuscript, and consequently affords no clue for the unravelling of the bibliographical and literary history of the cycle. The editor yielded to the craze for making things look tidy. In his introduction he wrote (p. xii.): ‘The divisions in the MS. being very incorrectly given, I have endeavoured to make as correct an arrangement as possible.’ Well, that was exactly what the scribe had endeavoured to do, and I think it would be difficult to say whether he or his successor made the worse muddle; but whereas the one was ingenuous and usually left the difficulties of his arrangement visible to the reader, the other at least partially succeeded in covering them up. A further division, agreeing neither with the scribe’s nor with Halliwell’s, was proposed by E. K. Chambers, in what is by far the best

¹ Some interesting arguments have recently been advanced for supposing the cycle to be that of Lincoln. The suggestion is not altogether new, but as yet the evidence falls far short of proof. The idea of connecting the elaborate development of the childhood of the Virgin in these plays with the festival of St. Anne at Lincoln is certainly attractive. See ‘*Athenæum*,’ 16 Aug. and 13 Sept., 1913.

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account of the cycle that has so far appeared; but even this is not wholly satisfactory, since, as Chambers himself observes, it is obvious that considerable portions of the cycle were not intended for division at all.

For the internal history of the plays we have three main sources of information: the make-up of the manuscript, the indications of division afforded by the scribe, and the comparison of the plays as we have them with the descriptions given us in the Prologue. Of course, beyond this there are general guides afforded by internal connexions between individual plays, resemblances and differences of style, and the evidence afforded by the different metres used. Broadly, the first two sources may be said to be bibliographical and the rest literary, and it is only by using both kinds to the utmost that we can hope to disentangle the history of this very complex cycle. In what follows I shall say enough to make plain the bearing of the bibliographical evidence, but I wish to state at once that the more minute bibliographical analysis applies chiefly to matters the importance of which is only apparent when we come to criticise the construction of the cycle in far greater detail than is possible in a lecture such as this.

As regards the subsidiary sources of information, I shall repeatedly have occasion to refer to correspondencies or contradictions between different plays, and shall attach a good deal of weight to the evidence they afford. On the other hand, I shall say very little about style, all judgments thereon

being notoriously subjective. The question of metre will necessarily occupy our attention a good deal, since the evidence it affords is of the greatest possible help. I may say at once that the most important metrical forms employed in the cycle are three in number. The first is a stanza of thirteen lines riming a b a b a b c d d d c. This rime-form is of a well-known northern pattern, being that of the whole body of Scottish stanzaic alliterative verse, and also of the distinctive compositions of the great Wakefield playwright. I refer to these stanzas for short as 'thirteeners.' The second is a stanza of eight lines riming a a a b a a a b or a a a b c c c b. In some passages the lines are much shorter than elsewhere, and sometimes the eight lines are cut down to six. These variations appear to be intentional. Both longer and shorter forms are very familiar, being for instance the metre of the bulk of the Chester cycle; they are often known as romance eights and sixes. I refer to them indifferently as 'romance stanzas.' The third metrical form is the eight-line stanza riming a b a b b c b c. Of this there are two rather well-marked varieties according as the lines are long or short. I call them 'long' and 'short octaves' respectively. Certain other forms, none very elaborate, also appear, and will be described in their proper places. They are less important than the above, and the total range is far less extended than in either of the great northern cycles.

There is one critical principle that I wish to lay down as regards metre. It is this, that, although

there is no reason why more than one stanza should not have been used in the original composition of a single play, an author would not change from one to another without some rational cause. It follows that wherever a change of stanza occurs without discoverable reason we are justified in supposing that we have not got the play in its original form. This canon has been commonly assumed by critics, and I do not think, if it is reasonably applied, that anyone is likely to quarrel with the results.

We will now see what sort of evidence may be expected from each of the three chief sources of information which I mentioned before. The manuscript is written on paper—this happens to be fortunate—and the size is quarto.¹ Almost all the leaves have been detached and mounted on guards, but a set of late signatures, in conjunction with the water-marks, enables us to reconstruct the original quires with all but absolute certainty. With the exception of one play the whole original text is in a single hand.² This is a good plain hand of the second half of the fifteenth century, showing marked East-Anglian peculiarities; near the middle of the manuscript occurs the date 1468, and there is no reason to doubt that this is actually the date of writing. The play of the Assumption, which immediately precedes 'Dooms-day,' is in a different hand, the home of which is less clear. Halliwell (p. 418) assigned this hand to

¹ That is to say, each leaf is one quarter of a sheet. Strictly speaking, even a paper manuscript has no format.

² There are a few incidental additions which are not in the same hand as the text.

the reign of Henry VIII. Had he examined more carefully the manuscript he was editing he would have found the hand of the main scribe both correcting and rubricating the additional play.

When we come to examine the make-up of the manuscript numerous irregularities become apparent. In some cases it would seem that the scribe wrote on a series of detached leaves, and though there was probably some reason for his doing so, this is not always easy to discover. In other cases the dislocation in the natural sequence of the leaves throws welcome light upon the manner in which the cycle was compiled. I shall have occasion to make use of the evidence such dislocations supply later on, and will here confine myself to the discussion of two remarkable instances. One occurs in the course of the scene representing the Last Supper. This, which is laid at the house of Symon the Leper, is interwoven by means of alternating scaffolds with that of the Conspiracy. Now it happens that in one place the scene originally shifted from the house of Symon to the Council Chamber at the junction of two quires. This is proved by an original catch-word. But at this point two leaves were inserted containing an elaborate version of the incident of Jesus warning his disciples that one of them was about to betray him. This incident already appeared in simpler form further on, so that the insertion caused actual duplication. The catch-word was altered to connect with the inserted leaves. But that was not all. One further leaf was prefixed to those already inserted. This

contained the incident of Mary Magdalen washing the feet of Christ, an incident which, unlike the Last Supper, really did take place at the house of Symon. The catchword was yet again altered.'

The other most conspicuous dislocation is the insertion of the Assumption play. We have already seen that this is written in a different hand from the rest of the manuscript. It is also written upon an independent quire of quite different paper, which is inserted in the middle of what is now the last quire of the codex. Previous to the insertion, 'Doomsday' followed quite regularly upon 'Pentecost.' The present arrangement, however, dates from the original make-up of the manuscript, for the 'Assumption' takes its place in the consecutive numbering indicated by the original scribe by means of large red numerals placed in the margins.

Before passing on I should like to conclude what there is to be said about the 'Assumption.' It is an independent insertion written in a different hand. I may so far anticipate as to say that there is no mention of it in the Prologue. All this suggests that it may have had an origin different from that of the other plays. After a careful study I have not been able to detect any difference

¹ The insertions occur at p. 263 of Halliwell's edition, immediately after the stage direction (which is deleted in the manuscript). This direction was originally immediately followed by the speech of Judas, 'Now cowntyrfeted,' on p. 267. The earlier insertion includes from the speech of Jesus, 'Myn herte is ryght sorry,' on p. 265 to the end of the stage direction on p. 267. This duplicates the passage on pp. 274-5. The subsequent insertion includes from the speech of Mary on p. 263 to the end of the stage direction on p. 265.

of dialect, and in any case, as we shall see later on, the extremely complex origin of the cycle must necessarily detract from the value of any evidence that dialectal peculiarities might afford. There is, however, one striking characteristic that must force itself upon the attention of anyone who studies the play in the original manuscript, though it is completely obscured in the printed edition. I allude to the metrical form which is peculiar in the extreme. The play is written in thirteeners and octaves of rather long and clumsy lines, but these stanzas are linked together by means of intercalary lines usually repeating the first rime of the following stanza. The rubricator thoroughly understood the metrical structure intended, for he prefixed a large paragraph to the first line of each stanza, and a small one to the first line of each intercalary group. I may be exposing my ignorance, but I do not remember to have met with this device elsewhere. Nothing at all similar occurs in the rest of the cycle. It suggests that the play was written in imitation of the stanzaic forms found elsewhere in the cycle by one whose powers of composition were inadequate to the task of forcing his matter into so exacting a metre.

The instances of dislocation I have detailed will give some idea of the nature if not of the extent of the bibliographical puzzles that anyone who wishes to make a serious study of the N-town cycle will have to face. Over and above the combination of different sources and the repeated revision of the text before it came into the hands of our scribe at all, we have complications introduced by the fact

that his actual manuscript appears in parts to have been cut about and re-arranged like the pieces of a puzzle.

I pass now to what I called our second main source of information, and as briefly as I can I will give a general outline of the text as the scribe has written and divided it. He has split up the cycle into a number of separate plays by means of large red arabic numerals placed in the margins of the leaves. Doomsday is numbered 42, but the number 17 has accidentally been omitted, so that the number of plays into which the scribe saw fit to divide the cycle is actually 41. Halliwell makes 42, Chambers 43; the Prologue records 40. But while in parts the action falls naturally into separate scenes, which are written as individual plays or pageants, in others the composition and writing are alike continuous, and all division and numeration purely arbitrary. For instance, the second play is made to begin in the middle of a stanza. In referring to the plays I use throughout the numbering of the scribe.¹

The first three plays—1, the first day of Creation and the fall of Lucifer; 2, from the second day to the Expulsion; 3, 'Cain and Abel'—are written quite continuously. It would appear to have been the original intention of the scribe to make play 4, 'Noah,' continuous likewise, for he has placed the

¹ Readers must be so good as to bear in mind that neither the numbering nor the division of the plays as I give them necessarily agrees with Halliwell's edition. As a rule, the relation will be obvious to anyone who follows the printed text, but in cases where difficulties arise I add footnotes giving the exact reference to Halliwell's text. The second play begins with the speech of Deus near the foot of p. 21.

heading, 'Introitus Noe,' not at the head of play 4, but at the end of play 3. Play 5, the 'Sacrifice of Isaac,' is written continuously with the preceding, but is quite independent in composition. Plays 6 and 7, the 'Giving of the Law' and the 'Prophets,' are separate both in action and writing.

Plays 8 to 13, containing the Birth of Mary, her Presentation in the Temple, her Marriage, the Annunciation, Joseph's trouble, and the Visit to Elizabeth, are written more or less continuously and are woven into a connected group by the appearances of an expositor called *Contemplatio*. We shall see later on that this group, though well defined, is not, as has sometimes been supposed, an original whole, but is of very complex origin.

Next we have Play 14, 'Purgation of Mary and Joseph'; 15, 'Nativity'; 16, 'Shepherds'; 18, 'Magi'; 19, 'Purification'; 20, 'Massacre of the Innocents'; 21, 'Christ and the Doctors'; 22, 'Baptism'; 23, 'Temptation'; 24, 'Woman taken in Adultery'; 25, 'Raising of Lazarus.' These are all distinct plays separately written.

The next group deals with the events leading up to the Passion. It may be called the Entry group. Opening with a sort of prologue spoken by Lucifer, it continues through the Council of the Jews, the Entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the Conspiracy, the Agony in the Garden, and the Betrayal. Both action and writing are perfectly continuous, the insertion of the numbers 26 to 28 being wholly arbitrary. The representation was also meant to be continuous, as appears from the

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stage directions, and to take place on a number of scaffolds disposed round an open space.

The same is true of the next group. This opens with another prologue, introducing a procession, and contains the Passion and Resurrection. There is an appearance of *Contemplatio* immediately following the prologue and beginning play 29, and the writing is continuous down to the end of the 'Hortulanus' scene. This is a very complex group, and the insertion of the numbers 29 to 37 is for the most part quite arbitrary.

The last group again consists of separate and independent plays: 38, 'Emmaus'; 39, 'Ascension'; 40, 'Pentecost'; 41, 'Assumption of the Virgin'; 42, 'Doomsday.' The end is lost.

Now, in the speech by *Contemplatio*, which forms a sort of second prologue or preface to the Passion group, there occurs a remarkable reference to 'the matere that we lefte the last yere.' This has been the subject of frequent comment, and it is clear that, in the form for which this preface was designed, the cycle, whatever it may have comprised, was intended for performance in yearly sections. It has been less generally remarked that the preface clearly states that the matter that 'last yere we shewyd' began with the Entry—in other words, that it comprised no more than the immediately preceding group of plays. If, therefore, *Contemplatio's* prologue is intended, as it presumably is, to apply to the cycle in its present form, we must suppose that this was meant to be acted in several, according to the above analysis in six, yearly sections.

The third main guide in our investigation is the comparison of the text as we find it with the description of the individual pageants supplied by the 'vexillatores' of the Prologue. This is by far the most powerful instrument of criticism at our disposal, and to it and to the metrical and other analysis of the plays themselves we must now turn. I propose to go more or less systematically through the cycle, and as I go I shall gather together whatever evidence I can find for the unravelling of the problems it presents. You will, of course, understand that in such a lecture as this it is impossible to do more than brush the surface of a fascinating subject and select a few of the more striking points for comment. Our survey must needs be cursory, and I must ask your indulgence if in the course of it I touch upon certain points the bearing of which may not be immediately apparent. It must suffice if by the end of my allotted hour I can produce sufficient points of evidence to warrant the very general and provisional inferences I propose to draw.

The Prologue is spoken by three 'vexillatores' or standard bearers, who recite in turn the subjects of the various pageants. It is composed, like a large portion of the cycle itself, in thirteeners. As a rule one stanza describes one pageant, but occasionally the description fills two stanzas, or one stanza describes two pageants. Two stanzas near the beginning are imperfect, consisting of four lines each, space being left in the manuscript for their completion. Towards the end four stanzas are distinguished by the greater length of their

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lines, and have apparently been rewritten. The first stanza is introductory, the last valedictory. The pageants as described in the Prologue are numbered, but the numbering has been tampered with by the original scribe. The first seven are regular, we then proceed: x, x, xi, xii, xiv, xv, xvi; then jump back to xv again and proceed regularly to xl. The irregular numbers are all over erasures, the original numeration from i to xl having been perfectly regular. What has happened is that the scribe has endeavoured to bring the numbering of the Prologue into agreement with that of the text. He succeeded in doing this all right as far as play 16, but when he discovered that he had omitted the number 17 altogether from his numeration of the text, he appears to have given up his attempt in disgust. I refer to the pageants of the Prologue throughout by their original, not by their altered numbers.¹

According to the Prologue the first play contains the Creation of Heaven and the Fall of Lucifer; the second, the events from the Second Day to the Expulsion from Paradise. This agrees with the text. But we have already remarked that the text, or rather the rubrication, begins play 2 in the middle of a stanza. Such an arrangement is clearly impossible, and we are forced to the conclusion that in this instance at least the Prologue was not written for the text as it stands.

¹ Halliwell, of course, prints the altered numbers in his text of the Prologue. I also follow the practice of the manuscript in referring to the plays themselves by arabic numerals, to the descriptions in the Prologue by roman.

This is unfortunate, for these early plays are in thirteeners like the Prologue, and it would be natural to suppose that they belong together. But there are signs of the text having been altered. The first play is very summary, and the account of the Fall of Lucifer abrupt in the extreme. There are fragmentary stanzas near the beginning of the second play, and, whereas the Prologue expressly states that woman was made from a rib of the man, this is ignored in the text. I conclude that in this case drastic compression and rewriting may have brought the division between two original plays into the middle of a stanza. Such revision would, of course, be later than the composition of the Prologue.

The second play includes a passage, namely, the Curse, in a different metre from the rest. It consists of eleven romance stanzas, and its insertion must have displaced original thirteeners. There is no actual proof that it is later than the Prologue, though it is natural to suppose so, and one piece of internal evidence points in that direction. The Prologue in no way identifies the Serpent with the Devil: in the text the thirteener portion simply has 'Serpens,' while that in romance stanzas makes the identification clear and speaks of 'Diabolus.'

'Cain and Abel' is a regular play in thirteeners agreeing with the Prologue.

The fourth play deals with Noah. The description in the Prologue does not give us much detail whereby to identify the actual piece. In the text the play opens in thirteeners, but with the

appearance of the Angel to Noah the metre changes to octaves of long lines, which continue to the end of the pageant. In the latter portion occurs a very remarkable passage. The author namely avails himself of the interval of a hundred years that elapse while Noah is absent building the ark, to introduce the apocryphal story of the death of Cain at the hands of blind Lamech, an incident not elsewhere treated in the English drama. Of this there is no hint in the Prologue, a fact which points to the play there described being the original thirteener play, the opening of which is alone extant in the text, though it cannot be held to afford actual proof that this is so. It should be observed that the stage directions in the octave portion—‘*Hic recedat Lameth et statim intrat Noe cum navi cantantes,*’ ‘*Et sic recedant cum navi*’—seem to imply a fixed open stage on to which large properties could be brought, not a movable pageant.

The fifth play is the ‘Sacrifice of Isaac.’ It is a quite regular play in octaves, the lines of which are, however, very much shorter than in the preceding piece. Like all the plays in short octaves, this of Isaac is perfectly independent, and it is marked off from its neighbours by the heading ‘*Introitus Abrahe*’ and an ‘*Explicit*’ at the end. The description in the Prologue is couched in far too general terms to enable us to say whether it was written for the extant play or not.

The sixth play contains the Giving of the Law to Moses. It is again an independent play in short octaves. The Prologue is in general agree-

ment with the text, though it is true that it does not explicitly mention the Burning Bush as the scene of the Lawgiving! Considering, however, what an unusual subject for a play the incident is in English drama, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that, in spite of the difference of metre, the description in the Prologue was actually written for the pageant we possess.

The last of the Old Testament plays is a 'Prophetæ,' another independent pageant in short octaves. Prophet plays, of course, abound, and there would be no reason to suppose that the one described in the Prologue was in fact the one now found in the text, were it not for the stress which both Prologue and text lay upon the 'Radix Jesse.'

We now pass to the second group of plays, what we may call the Incarnation section, and agreement with the Prologue ceases abruptly. The separate pageants are linked together by speeches of *Contemplatio*. In a sort of preface this character promises a representation of events down to the Visit to Elizabeth 'and therwith a conclusyon.' This promise is fulfilled. But it is the first three plays, namely the 'Conception,' 'Presentation,' and 'Marriage of the Virgin,' that are the most intimately connected, there being appearances of *Contemplatio* in the intervals between these plays, numbers 8, 9, and 10. The 'Annunciation,' play 11, also begins with a speech by *Contemplatio*, but this is either a mere blunder on the part of the scribe or else a very clumsy piece of botching on that of the reviser. For an examination of the passage in the manuscript proves beyond all doubt

that, of *Contemplatio's* four stanzas, the first two should be spoken by the Angels and the second two by the Archangels.¹ There is no further appearance of *Contemplatio* till the end of the 'Visit to Elizabeth,' play 13, when he makes his promised 'conclusyon.'

Speaking very generally, and disregarding insertions and revision, we may say that the 'Conception' and 'Presentation,' plays 8 and 9, together with the 'Visit to Elizabeth,' 13, are in long octaves, the 'Marriage' and 'Joseph's Trouble,' plays 10 and 12, in thirteeners, and the 'Annunciation,' 11, in short octaves. The speeches by Con-

- 'The passage is certainly assigned to *Contemplatio* by the scribe, but at the top of the page, above the first stanza (there is, of course, no heading), there stands in the manuscript '1,' i.e. *Primus*. Before the first line of the third stanza is the figure '2.' Stanzas 5 and 6 are spoken by *Virtutes*, stanza 7 by *Pater* (i.e. God), after which the discussion is carried on by *Veritas*, *Misericordia*, *Iusticia*, and *Pax*. Now, elsewhere *Contemplatio* is an expositor who takes no part in the action of the play. But in the four stanzas assigned to him here the deity is directly addressed, and the intercession on man's behalf begun, which is carried on in the speech of the *Virtues*. It is clear then that the speaker or speakers of these lines (for the manuscript clearly suggests that we have to do with two speeches, not one) must be characters of the play on a par with the *Virtues*. Who they are appears from the lines in speech of the latter:

Aungelys, archaungelys, we thre,
That ben in the fyrst ierarchie,
For man to thin hy mageste,
Mercy, mercy, mercy we crye.

Angels, archangels, and virtues do in fact form, in ascending order, the first or lowest hierarchy of heavenly beings. Bonaventura, upon whose '*Meditationes*' the subsequent 'parliament of heaven' is ultimately based, mentions the intercession of the '*beatissimi spiritus*' in heaven, and there could be no point in the playwright selecting the *Virtues* alone.

templatio are mainly in long lines and follow irregularly various metres. The make-up of the manuscript affords fairly conclusive evidence that they were written in after the rest in spaces left for the purpose. They are, therefore, presumably the work of a reviser or compiler who was handing the copy to our scribe piecemeal.

Now, in the Prologue we find no trace of the Conception, Presentation, and Elizabeth plays at all. These are the long octave pieces, and it will be remembered that the Prologue was likewise silent on the subject of the Lamech episode in the same metre. The portions in long octaves are, therefore, additions to the cycle subsequent to the composition of the Prologue. This is our first important result in analysis. Plays viii and ix of the Prologue contain the Marriage of the Virgin, x the Annunciation, xi Joseph's Trouble.

Let us take the plays of the text in order. The 'Conception' is quite regular in long octaves. The 'Presentation,' in the same metre, includes a passage written in quatrains and shorter lines, but the change is accounted for by the subject, the recitation of the Fifteen Degrees. With regard to the 'Marriage' it will be noticed that two Prologue plays correspond to a single play in the text. There is reason to suppose that the latter has been considerably cut down as well as revised and interpolated, and there is satisfactory evidence both that it contains the remains of the plays described in the Prologue, and also that it has a different origin from its immediate predecessors. They, of course, leave Mary an inmate of the

temple, whereas the present play, like the Prologue, makes her parents bring her to the temple, in response to the priest's summons, in her twelfth year. Again, the Prologue explicitly states that at her departure the priest provides her with three maiden companions, whom the text duly introduces by name, Susanne, Rebecca, and Sephor. The play has been interpolated. Two passages in octaves have been inserted after the present manuscript was written, a third towards the end of the play belongs to an earlier date. In this the lines are fairly short, though it can hardly be assigned to the short octave group. As we have seen in the previous play, the long octave writer could compose quite short lines when he pleased, and I have no hesitation in regarding this passage, which deals with the Psalter, as an insertion by the hand that wrote the Fifteen Degrees above. There is no mention of it in the very full description in the Prologue.

The Annunciation play, in short octaves, is one of the most remarkable in the cycle. It begins with what *Contemplatio* (in the link between plays 9 and 10) calls the 'parlement of hefne,' the well-known contention of the four daughters of God, and then proceeds to a Salutation simple in design, but elaborate and distinctly ecclesiastical in composition. Now the stanza in the Prologue describes a quite simple Annunciation play of the usual type, and cannot by any possibility have been written for the play we have in the text. Observe in particular that the Prologue expressly states that Mary's three maidens hear the Angel's voice,

but see no one, while the text makes no mention of them whatever. This connects the piece described in the Prologue with the foregoing Marriage play, and there is no temerity in the conjecture that the original piece, displaced by the present composition in octaves, was like the 'Marriage,' written in thirteeners.

The next play both in Prologue and text is the 'Joseph.' Clearly it was originally a thirteener play, though but few fragments in this metre now survive. For it is connected with the Marriage and Annunciation plays of the Prologue by the reappearance of Susanne and Sephor in thirteener passages. The play as we have it is, however, chiefly written in a ten-line stanza riming aabaabcbcb, which we have not met before. That the mixture of metres is not original is proved by contradiction in the text. As it stands, namely, the appearance of the Angel to Joseph is in response to a prayer by Mary, written in the ten-line stanza, that God would enlighten her husband, since she herself would rather suffer shame than reveal the origin of her condition. So at least I read the passage. But this she had already repeatedly done in the earlier thirteener portion. This fact points rather to borrowing from a different source than to revision proper. There is no direct evidence that the combination took place later than the

' For I have levyr abyde respyt,
To kepe thi sone in privite,
Grauntyd by the Holy Spyryt,
Than that it xulde be opynd by me.'

Halliwell, p. 121. But 'respyt' should surely be 'despyt.'

composition of the prologue, though it is, of course, natural to suppose so. The 'Visit to Elizabeth,' which completes this group, is, as we have already seen, unrepresented in the Prologue.

The next group includes the Nativity and Missionary Life of Christ. The plays comprised in it are independent of one another. The first two have the peculiarity that the stanzas describing them in the Prologue are imperfect. In either case four lines only are written; these just mention the subject of the play, and a blank is left in the manuscript for the completion of the stanza. That this is not due to accidental damage to the copy the scribe was following is shown, not only by each quatrain being complete in itself, but also by the fact that, as we shall see in a moment, the introduction of the second of these plays accounts for a discrepancy between the Prologue and the text in the one that follows.

The play numbered xii in the Prologue and 14 in the text is a remarkable composition headed 'Pagement de purgation Marie et Joseph.' The subject, unknown elsewhere in English drama, is treated in short octaves with a good deal of rude force. A prologue, not originally contemplated by the scribe, has been prefixed.¹ It is in romance stanzas, topical and comic.

As originally written, the play began with the stage direction, Halliwell, p. 132. The scribe provided the following stanza with a three-line initial, and put the play number, 14, in the margin opposite to it. But when he did this he had not yet finished writing play 13. He had got, I think, as far as the line: 'He xal remedy it whan it plesyth his mercy' (p. 128), which was the end of his copy for that play, and he left nearly two and a half

The next play, Prologue xiii, text 15, is again in short octaves with an insertion in confused metre, and deals with the Nativity. It includes the journey to Bethlehem, the seeking of the midwives, the birth, and the miracle of Salome's hand. The Prologue mentions nothing but the fetching of the midwives. As regards both this and the preceding piece, there can be no question that the plays in the text and the quatrains in the Prologue are alike insertions.

The proof of this statement is to be found in the following Shepherd's play, Prologue xiv, text 16. For the Prologue expressly says that 'In the fourteenth pageant Cryst shal be born,' while no such thing happens in the text. Indeed, it is obvious that as soon as a Midwives' play was introduced into the cycle it had to include the Nativity. In the play itself we find that the first stanza, 'Gloria in Excelsis,' and one subsequent one are thirteeners, while all the rest, except for one short passage misplaced, are romance stanzas.

pages blank for the 'conclusyon' by Contemplatio which he knew he had to expect. When he was then handed the prologue to play 14 he made use of the last of these blank pages for the insertion. Next he received, not only Contemplatio's 'conclusyon,' but three and a half additional octaves to the text of play 13. All this had to be crowded into something less than a page and a half, and a very tight fit it was. I may point out that the three lines printed by Halliwell on p. 128:

'Come and (*should be* I) pray yow specially;
Iwys ye are welcome, Mary;
For this comfortabelest comynge, good God, gramercy!'

have no business where they are. The manuscript adds them in the margin as an alternative ending in place of the 28 lines that follow.

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The thirteeners must be fragments of the original play, the opening of which has been bodily cut out as duplicating what went before, while the remainder has been almost wholly rewritten. It should be observed that the half burlesque names of the shepherds in this play serve to connect it with the comic prologue to the 'Purgation' in the same stanza.

Looking back for a moment, we shall now perceive that the original cycle described in the Prologue began, so far as the New Testament plays are concerned, with the series: 'Marriage of the Virgin' (two plays), 'Annunciation,' 'Joseph,' 'Nativity and Shepherds,' and that all these were written in thirteeners. Subsequently a different Annunciation play was substituted, and Purgation and Midwives' plays were added from a different source in short octaves. The original Nativity and Shepherds play was revised presumably at the same time. The Prologue was amended so as to include the two new plays, but no systematic attempt was made to bring it into accordance with the text. The Joseph play was also revised, but at an uncertain date.

The make-up of the manuscript shows that the Magi play, Prologue xv, text 18 (should be 17), is a very composite affair, but the details are singularly obscure. There are fragments of a presumably original thirteener play, but most of the piece is in romance stanzas, and five quatrains of long lines have been prefixed by a reviser.

The Prologue now immediately proceeds to the 'Massacre of the Innocents.' The text interpolates

a play on the Purification. It is a quite regular play, and is entirely composed in the ten-line stanza already noticed in the 'Joseph.' Its non-appearance in the Prologue proves that the revision of the 'Joseph' must have been subsequent to the introduction of the 'Purgation' and the 'Midwives.'

The 'Massacre of the Innocents' occupies two plays in the Prologue (xvi, xvii), but only one in the text (20). Distinctive points in the description of the former are that the Knights bring in dead children to show to Herod, and that Death appears and kills him and his knights, the Devil taking their souls. Both points appear in the text, the former, however, in a romance, the latter in a thirteener passage. In general, indeed, the earlier portion of the play is in the one, the latter in the other stanza. What seems to have happened is that an original play in thirteeners was expanded into two plays by the addition of romance matter, that the present stanzas of the Prologue were written for this expanded play, and that it was subsequently cut down again to its present dimensions. It should be noticed that the initial stage direction, belonging to the romance portion: 'Tunc respiciens senescallus vadyt ad Herodem,' connects with the end of the Magi play, a fact of interest alike as proving the insertion of the 'Purification' to be later than the work of the romance reviser, and also as illustrating the tendency of that writer to contemplate continuous representation.

'Christ and the Doctors,' Prologue xviii, text

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21, the 'Woman in Adultery,' xxi and 24, and the 'Raising of Lazarus,' xxii and 25, are regular short octave plays, and agree with the Prologue, though it cannot be confidently asserted that the stanzas in the latter must have been written for the extant plays. In particular the remarkable and lively drama of the Adulteress seems rather inadequately described. The 'Baptism' and 'Temptation of Christ,' Prologue xix, xx, text 22 (not numbered'), 23, also agree with the Prologue, and are in thirteens. This concludes the third section of the cycle.

It would be useless on this occasion to make any detailed analysis of the Entry and Passion sections, since the problems they present are far too complicated to yield to any but the most minute investigation. A few very general remarks must therefore suffice. The most striking feature of these sections is the appearance of a source which has not so far been in evidence, even if it has been present at all. Considerable portions of this part of the cycle are, namely, written in a mixture of quatrains, some of long, some of short lines, and of couplets. To what extent the former may be due to the breakdown under revision of earlier octaves we need not inquire, since this can hardly account for all cases in which they appear. But that considerable revision and rewriting has taken place is evident. The correspondence with the Prologue, except in one important respect to be

¹ The scribe cancelled two leaves at the beginning of this play, and in their place inserted one leaf with the verso not quite full. On this inserted leaf he forgot to repeat the play number.

mentioned later, breaks down utterly. The two sections are, each within itself, continuous both as regards action and composition, the former taking place in an open space about which are disposed certain located scaffolds. Besides the new source we can trace fragments in thirteeners, short and long octaves, and romance stanzas. There has also been revision apparently by the writer of the *Contemplatio* passages.

Some isolated points deserve notice. After the long satirical speech by Demon in long octaves, which forms the introduction to the Entry section, there is a passage in somewhat shorter octaves by John the Baptist. This strange insertion prophesies of the coming of Christ, and can only be regarded as a fragment of a Baptism play.¹ Now we have already seen that the 'Baptism' extant in the cycle is the original thirteener play. The inference is that what we have here is a fragment of the rejected 'Baptism' of the short octave source, worked in as a sort of preface to the events of the Passion. The lines are, it is true, a little long, but this may be due to their having been revised. With the curious insertion of the scene of the Magdalen washing Christ's feet, which occurs in the middle of the Last Supper, we have already been concerned. It

¹ Halliwell, p. 243. It is quite true that the Baptist sometimes appears in prophet plays, and that there was a time in the development of the liturgical drama when the 'Prophetæ' served as a prologue to the Passion. It might, therefore, be possible to regard the position of the present fragment as original if we could bring ourselves to believe that such a late and composite work as the N-town cycle preserved such very primitive and exceptional features. For my own part I am quite unable to believe this.

is substantially in thirteeners, which proves that the cycle must have originally contained a play on the real Supper at the House of Simon of which the Prologue has lost all trace.

The Passion section is introduced by a procession of the Apostles interpreted in quatrains by two Doctors. This is written as an independent Prologue, not forming part of any numbered play, and has several blank pages before and after it. But the play immediately following opens with another prologue by *Contemplatio* which supplies us with the famous clue as to the yearly sections. Through the Trial the correspondence between the text and the Prologue vanishes altogether. But from immediately after the Condemnation four Prologue plays, numbers xxx to xxxiii, agree in essentials with four plays, numbers 32 to 35, as marked in the text,¹ and though the correspondence is not perfect it is clear that still less is it fortuitous. Now these four stanzas of the Prologue have longer lines than the rest, and there can be no reasonable doubt that they were written after the text had assumed approximately its present form. They are, therefore, much later than their neighbours. A good deal of the latter part of the Passion, particularly the Harrowing of Hell and the Resurrection, is written in romance stanzas, and the frequent changes of scene and the connecting directions suggest that it was actually written for a polyscenic stage. The section ends with what is really an independent short octave play on the Appearance to Mary Magdalen, which agrees

¹ Halliwell, p. 316, speech of 'Primus mulier' (!), to p. 353 foot.

with the description in the Prologue (numbers 37 and xxxv).

The last division of the cycle opens with an Emmaus play, number 38. This is duly described in the Prologue as pageant xxxvi, but whereas the latter contains the Peregrini episode only, the text includes the return of the disciples and the Incredulity of Thomas as well. Moreover, the two portions of the play are distinguished by being, the first in short, the second in long octaves. Now, the Incredulity is the subject of play xxxvii of the Prologue, a distinct pageant, the description of which, however, is included in one stanza with pageant xxxviii, the 'Ascension.' Since the Ascension play of the text, number 39, is in thirteeners, we may infer that the Prologue 'Incredulity' was probably in the same metre. It follows that the original play has been cut out and the loss made good by an addition to the preceding Emmaus pageant.

The Ascension play, number 39, or what is left of it, is, I have said, in thirteeners. But it has been severely cut down. Some four stanzas are all that remain. Then comes a small blank in the manuscript followed by three stanzas, lacking speaker's name, which describe the election of Matthias. Halliwell printed these as though they were part of the foregoing speech of the Angel. They doubtless belong to Peter. There is no suggestion of them in the description of pageant xxxviii of the Prologue. Presumably, therefore, they are the remains of an originally independent play on this subject which has been cut out of the Prologue list.

The play of Pentecost, number 40, has been,

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even more cruelly cut down, three stanzas alone remaining, the first of which was strangely misprinted by the editor.¹ One word of warning I ought to add. Although what remains of these two plays is in thirteener stanzas, these are not of the usual type. The usual formula begins a bababab: here we have ababbcbcb. It is, therefore, possible that these pieces may not be original.

The 'Assumption,' play 41, which follows next, has been already sufficiently described;² it is unrepresented in the Prologue. The last of all, 'Doomsday,' number 42, is again a regular thirteener play, and agrees with pageant xl of the Prologue so far as it goes. But it is imperfect owing to the loss of a quire at the end of the manuscript.

Now, what conclusions are we to draw from the facts noticed? A few I have ventured to suggest as we went along, but it remains to formulate some sort of general theory as to the growth of the cycle.

To begin with, the Prologue has been revised at two different periods and by two different hands. Four stanzas near the end have been rewritten after the Passion section had assumed more or less its present very late form, and the rewriting was done by one who was unable to imitate the terse short lines of his model. But the two imperfect stanzas inserted earlier prove that there had been a previous revision by a writer whose work is not metrically distinguishable from that of the original author.

¹ The curious jumble that appears at the head of this play in the printed text really constitutes the first four lines of the first stanza, the names being those of the speakers.

² See p. 372 above.

Perhaps the latest revisional work on the text was done by the author of *Contemplatio*'s speeches. He seems to have been writing while the present manuscript was in course of compilation, and is probably responsible for a good deal of revision throughout. I suspect that he wrote the four late stanzas of the Prologue, and possibly also the Assumption play. What makes it difficult to recognize his work is that he did not affect any one stanza particularly. His lines are long and flabby. Closely associated with his work are the portions in long octaves. That they are revisional work, expressly written for the positions they now occupy, and not borrowed from an independent source, is, I think, clear from the Incredulity episode appended to the Emmaus play. Observe also that the plays on the Conception and Presentation of the Virgin, which are in this metre, appear to be expressly written to lead up to that on the Marriage. It is just possible that these portions were written by the author of the *Contemplatio* passages, though for my own part I think it unlikely. They are later than the first revision of the Prologue.

Another portion which there seems good ground for believing to be revisional is that written in romance stanzas. The introduction to the 'Purgation,' which must obviously have been written for its present place, is in this metre, and work in it appears to overlies original thirteener composition in the Paradise, Shepherds, Magi, and Innocents plays. That the Prologue takes account of it seems proved by the last of these. Both thirteener

and short octave plays have been modified by the addition of matter in romance stanzas. Now the task of the first reviser of the Prologue was, we saw, precisely the combination of thirteener and short octave sources; and the Prologue takes account of romance passages. The conclusion seems inevitable that the combiner of the two sources, the first reviser of the Prologue, and the romance author are one and the same.

Of the quatrain and couplet portions I do not propose to speak. They seem to point most likely to an independent source, but the whole problem of the Entry and Passion sections is too complicated and obscure to be treated on this occasion.

The insertions in the Joseph play in a ten-line stanza, and the whole of the 'Purification' in that metre, are almost certainly borrowings from an independent source subsequent to the first revision of the Prologue. They are remarkable for their more lyrical tone.

There remain the thirteener and short octave portions only. In the 'Annunciation' we found a clear case of a play in short octaves being substituted for an earlier one presumably in thirteeners, and a similar process was traceable in the Nativity group. It is clear, therefore, that the short octave plays are intruders. Did they come from an independent source, or were they written expressly for insertion in the present cycle? If we are right in regarding the curious speech of the Baptist in the Entry section as a fragment of a short octave Baptism play, the former is the correct alternative. And, in any case, the absence of any work of a

revisional nature in this stanza points strongly to that conclusion. Moreover, the plays in short octaves are the most sharply defined and independent of the whole cycle, and are, therefore, in striking contrast to the work of the man responsible for their introduction, whose original composition favours continuous representation.

This brings us to the conclusion, which I regard as being as certain as anything in so complicated a case can be, that the cycle consisted in the first instance of a homogeneous series of plays in the thirteener stanza.

Let me bring this lecture, and with it my course as Sandars Reader, to a close by resuming as briefly as I can what seems to me to have been the history of this remarkable cycle. An original series of plays, the extent of which cannot now be certainly ascertained, but must have been considerable, composed throughout in a distinctive stanza of thirteen lines, with a Prologue in the same metre, was modified and expanded by the substitution and insertion of other plays drawn from another cycle written, so far as we know throughout, in short-lined octaves. The amalgamation was effected by a reviser who himself worked over the whole and made additions in the romance stanza. It was apparently this same reviser who was responsible for working up two sections of the cycle, the Entry and the Passion, into continuous wholes, and in these he would seem to have drawn upon another source, which is, to say the least, not in evidence elsewhere. He also revised the Prologue somewhat perfunctorily, inserting stanzas

in the original metre (but sometimes imperfect) to correspond with the new plays he had introduced, but, in cases where he had substituted a new play for an old, usually leaving the original stanza, even if it did not accurately describe the new piece, and refraining from touching the description of the two sections he had recast.

After he had finished his work one whole play and portions of a second were introduced from yet another source, distinguished by its unusual ten-line stanza as well as by stylistic peculiarities of its own.

A different reviser wrote and inserted in the cycle what practically amounts to three whole plays of the Incarnation group, besides considerable passages elsewhere, all in long-lined octaves.

Lastly, yet another reviser, it would seem, wrote the distinctive *Contemplatio* prefaces and links, and worked over various portions of the cycle to no small extent. He imitated various metres, re-wrote four stanzas of the Prologue in the Passion section to agree with the text in its final form, and possibly added the Assumption play as an original contribution.

I have spoken of these revisions as successive. That is the natural way to regard them, but it may not be actually true. The work of the last reviser was clearly going on while the extant manuscript was being written. But when the scribe wrote the Purgation play he certainly had not before him the first reviser's introduction to it. Of course, the last reviser may have omitted to hand it to him. But it is also possible that there were several revisers at work upon the cycle about the same time, *circa*

1465 to 1470, and that they had different opportunities or inclinations for bringing the Prologue into agreement with their own work. They must, however, have worked over one another's contributions to some extent.

Each of the three original sources consisted of separate and independent plays of the type adapted for processional acting. It was the revisers alone who contemplated continuous performance on a polyscenic stage. When the Prologue was first revised the cycle had already ceased to be processional, though it continued to be described as though it were a series of independent pageants. Whether the allusion at the end: 'At six of the belle we gynne oure play In N towne,' belongs to the original composition or to the first revision, I see no means of determining, but it clearly still contemplates the performance of the whole cycle at some annual festival, and msut mean six o'clock in the morning. Whether the cycle in anything like its present shape was ever acted seems doubtful. That it was designed for production in a series of annual sections is clear, but how far this represented a serious intention it is impossible to say. One thing, I think, is certain: the extant manuscript was written, not for purposes of acting, but of private reading. Why else has the scribe ornamented the margins of his leaves with elaborate genealogical tables based upon the 'Legenda Aurea,' and notes as to the dimensions of the ark? And it was only in the extant manuscript that the cycle assumed its final form.

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