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Struggles with Dramatic Form in 16th-Century English Biblical Plays

Abstract: The aim of the article is to pinpoint how 16th-century biblical drama tried to appropriate its genre and medium to carry the reformist message and in what sense the project turned out to be a self-defeating one. The analysis of selected plays from reformed biblical cycles (*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, play iv; and "The Norwich Grocers' Play") and newly composed drama (John Bale's plays, Lewis Wager's *Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*, the anonymous "History of Jacob and Esau"), supported with an overview of the criticism on the matter, reveals some common tensions in the dramatic texts which may have had their roots in the reformist need to eliminate any room for doubt that a theatrical performance could leave. The conclusion is that, in its attempts at striking the right balance between dramatizing and overt sermonizing, engaging and distancing, as well as providing an immersive experience and discouraging it, post-Reformation Scripture-based drama oscillated between being more effective as a performance or as a carrier of the doctrinal message, with the resulting tendency to subvert either the former or the latter.

Keywords: biblical drama, mystery cycle, Reformation, Chester cycle, Norwich cycle, John Bale, Lewis Wager, Jacob and Esau

1. Introduction

There is some evidence for as many as fifty biblical plays being produced or offered for acting for the first time in the 16th century, with the texts of half of them still known today (Blackburn 7). However, the tradition of dramatizing the Bible did not continue – at least not as a mainstream form of entertainment – beyond the 16th century (Blackburn 8; O'Connell 90–91). The present study analyses the form and medium of 16th-century biblical drama to demonstrate how it turned out to be

problematic as the carrier of post-Reformation piety. It focuses on how both the genre and, more broadly speaking, the very medium of dramatic performance could hinder the promotion of the newly emerging and evolving reformed beliefs, and how the plays distanced themselves from the theatrical context to try to overcome those difficulties.

The medieval invention of enacting the Bible and thus teaching a religious and moral lesson was utilized by the early modern proponents of the reformed religion in two ways. One was to compose new plays adapting Scripture-based material; another – to revise some of the already existing pre-Reformation mystery plays in the spirit of the new doctrines. The discussion that follows draws examples from both the former and the latter practice and points out a common tendency of the emergent drama to reveal some unease with dramatization as a means of propagating the Bible and with an immersive theatrical experience as an efficient way to teach new doctrines. The unease may have been related to the fact that the genre and medium of a mystery play employed by the reformers had a potential to produce doubt. As Erin E. Kelly argues, the pre-Reformation mystery plays were prone to embracing it both on the level of their content and form (2012, 52–55). The 16th century Biblical drama, in turn, did not seem to be inclined to accept any room for its audiences' confusion or doubt that would disturb the intended religious message. The post-Reformation Biblical plays tried to eliminate any potential confusion through various means that were supposed to grant a more objective, informed, and unambiguous understanding of their message. One method was overt sermonizing or summarizing used on top of, or in place of, dramatizing; another such strategy was to distance the audience temporarily and emotionally from the represented worlds of the plays. The latter could mean departing from the mystery-style engagement of the audience in the performance altogether or using some distancing strategies alongside those employed to involve the spectators. The resulting oscillation between dramatizing and sermonizing, engaging and distancing, and providing an immersive experience and discouraging it could lead to the inner tensions being palpable in the plays. The case studies to follow explore such tensions emerging from the attempts of the plays at finding a compromise between the inherited form and new agendas to follow.

2. Reformed Cyclic Plays and Bale's Reformist Cycle

One example of rewriting a pre-Reformation play in the spirit of the new teachings is "The Norwich Grocers' Play," representing the Fall of Man episode, which survives in two versions: an incomplete "A" text, which we know was in use in 1533, and a "B" text, "newely" revised in 1565, "accordynge unto the Skripture," as a note preceding the play indicates ("The Norwich Grocers' Play" 11; Harty 84). The latter, according to Roberta Mullini, "presents some features that manifest

the anonymous playwright's desire to adapt an old tradition to the new Reformist episteme so as to turn a Catholic text into a Protestant (if not Puritan) one, but at the same time not to renounce certain dramatic conventions of the theatre of the past" (125). The mixture of the said conventions involves, on the one hand, a standard enactment of the biblical scenes from the Garden of Eden, and, on the other hand, an addition of figures that serve as commentators and allegorical conveyors of the postlapsarian state.

The most prominent difference between the pre- and post-Reformation version of the play is their disparate ending. After Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise, the "A" text concludes with a lament sung by them:

> *And so thei xall syng, walkyng together about the place, wryngyng ther handes.*
> Wythe dolorous sorowe we maye wayle and wepe
> Both nyght and daye in sory sythys full depe.
> N.B. These last 2 lines set to musick twice over and again, for a chorus of 4 pts. ("The Norwich Grocers' Play" 11)

As both the lines spoken by Adam and Eve and the stage directions imply, the ending is supposed to have an emotional impact achieved through the piteous lyrics and melody of the song as well as the characters' gestures. A detailed account for the year 1534 in *Grocers' Book* lists a charge that the guild paid to an organ player, among other performers in the play, and one for borrowing the instrument (accounts qtd. in Davis xxxii), so we know that the 1533 spectacle was enriched with organ music accompanying the song. The "B" text also incorporates a song – this time a laudatory one – but the pageant ends on a more didactic note. It draws closer to a morality play at that point (a conflation popular in 16th-century biblical drama at large), since Adam becomes everyman and there appear the characters of Dolor and Myserye, who stand for the condition of mankind in the postlapsarian world, as well as the Holy Ghost, who explains how the belief in Christ is a remedy to the sorrowful condition that Adam found himself in. The Holy Ghost teaches Adam that his armour and weapon against sorrow and misery shall be "the brest-plate of rightousnes," "the shylde of faythe," "the hellmett of salvacion," and "the sworde of the Spright, which is the worde of God" ("The Norwich Grocers' Play" 17, lines 139–142). The comfort that Adam derives from the Holy Ghost's speech and from the idea of death being overcome by "forepredestinacion" ("The Norwich Grocer's Play" 17, line 149) has clear post-Reformation overtones.

The *Grocers' Book* accounts mostly give just a total sum that the staging of the "Pageant" cost a given year, so they do not provide an opportunity to follow the changes in what the money was spent on in a systematic way, but an inventory of items related to the Pageant from 1565 lists one telling prop not mentioned in the 1534 or any other account – a "face" for "the Father" (Davis xxxv), i.e. a mask for God, probably used in order to avoid representing God on stage with an

actor's face. That may have been a nod to objections concerning impersonating the deity that the reformers must have started voicing around that time in the context of Biblical drama. The latter were also addressed by the Chester cycle, whose post-Reformation Banns instruct the players that "all those persones that as godes doe playe / in clowdes come downe with voyce, and not be seene; / for noe man can proportion that Godhead, I saye, / to the shape of man–face, nose, and eyne" ("The Late Banns….," lines 196–199).

Some post-Reformation overtones are also revealed in a speech opening the "B" version, delivered by the Prolocutor. The first of the two variants of the prologue to the "B" text (i.e. one that was to be used when the play was performed without any other episodes preceding it) ensures that the plays which the Fall of Man episode used to follow "with the Skriptures most justly agree," and both variants refer the audience to the biblical chapters as the sources of this or the preceding play ("The Norwich Grocers' Play" 11, 12). The Prolocutor then outlines the play and comments on the significance of the events that are about to unfold in an appraising tone, interpreting them before the audience has a chance to see them staged:

> [Prologue 1]: The Lord did create woman owte of a ribbe of man;
> Which woman was deceyvyd with the Serpentes darkned myste;
> By whose synn owr nature is so weak no good we can;
>
> [Prologue 2]: And here begyneth owr pageant to make the declaration,
> From the letter C. in the chapter before saide,
> […]
> And of the deavilles temptacion, diseaivinge with a lye
> The woman, beinge weakest, that cawsed man to tast. ("The Norwich Grocers' Play" 12)

Apart from expounding the meaning and the consequences of the events that are about to be performed and providing a reference to the biblical verses the play is based on, the remarks seem to be aimed at dispelling any potential confusion on the audience's part. While in the "A" text the Serpent just appears on stage in the form of an angel (from what we can infer from Eve's comment later in the play: "An angell cam from Godes grace" ("The Norwich Grocers' Play" 10, line 74)), thus possibly confounding the audience and Eve simultaneously at first, in the "B" text the potential puzzlement is dispelled by the Prolocutor, who unmasks the Serpent's deception before the play even begins, and then by the expository speech given by the Serpent himself before he engages in a conversation with Eve. Overall, the "A" text relies on showing the action on stage and the "B" text leans to a much greater extent towards telling the audience what is happening in an explicit way. The former makes the audience identify with the characters of Adam and Eve by first making

them share Eve's confusion and then empathize with the characters, who sing their disheartening song that conveys their despair. The latter contains the emotional involvement by distancing the audience from Eve, who they have advantage over having listened to the prologue and to Satan's speech, and then by stimulating the audiences' intellectual rather than affective response to the episode at the end.

Another cycle that underwent post-Reformation revisions is that of Chester. Yet, we can only infer what the process of reforming it looked like based on external evidence as set against some clues in the manuscripts, since the whole cycle does not survive in pre- and post-Reformation copies that could be collated in a similar manner to those of "The Norwich Grocers' Play."[1] The fact that all manuscripts postdate the last performance of the cycle does not mean that they are fully revised Protestant versions that consistently promote the new doctrines. The cycle is, as Paul Whitfield White puts it, an "unevenly reformed" one (2008, 113). In the light of Chester's palimpsestic nature and the lack of any single performance text that we could safely assume was staged in the form in which it survives, we can only speculate on both what the pre- and post-Reformation performances looked like and where the numerous revisions were heading before the project was abandoned in 1575, with the last recorded performance of the cycle.

One extra-textual indicator that some post-Reformation revisions must have been made to the Chester cycle late in its history is Christopher Goodman's 1572 letter to the archbishop of York in which he complaints about some explicitly Catholic references in the text of the cycle, such as, for example, bread becoming Christ's flesh through the words and gestures of a priest. That had to be revised later since the manuscript versions of the fragment referred to by Goodman read "becomes my fleshe through your beleeffe" (Mills 1998, 181–182). Pre- and post-Reformation versions of the Banns, that is, an announcement of the performance delivered publicly in the year when the cycle was to be staged, shed some more light on the revising process. While the Early Banns are a simple description of the pageants that particular guilds had to prepare, the already quoted Late Banns, composed and revised most probably between 1548 and 1572 (Clopper 240), and clearly post-Reformation in character, are a mixture of an apology for some elements of the ensuing performance that have remained unchanged and an emphatic announcement of certain changes to come. In other words, they both signal some rewriting of the cycle and, as Heather Hill-Vásquez notes, try to remodel the audience's response to those fragments that have not been revised (19–20).

A revision implied by the Late Banns could have been made to the text of the Last Supper episode. The Banns emphatically explain that the producers of the play should stick to the text and utter the exact same words that Christ used, namely that bread and wine should be a memorial:

> And howe Criste our Savioure at his laste supper
> gave his bodye and bloode for redemtion of us all,

> yow Bakers see that with the same wordes you utter
> as Criste himselfe spake them, to be a memorall
> of that deathe and passion which in playe after ensue shall ("The Late Banns…," lines 131–135)

One more point at which the Banns are so emphatic when it comes to adhering to the text – arguably to signal that it has undergone some revision – is when they introduce what we now know as play iv. In the extant manuscripts, this play consists of three episodes – a meeting of Abraham, Lot, and Melchizedek; God's promises given to Abraham; and Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac – which are interspersed with explanatory speeches given by the figure of the Expositor. The pre-Reformation Banns only mention the Abraham and Isaac episode, while the Late Banns also mention the Melchizedek episode:

> The sacrefise that faithfull Abraham of his sonne should make,
> you Barbers and Waxe-chandlers of antiente tyme
> in the 4th pagente, with paynes ye did take,
> in decent sorte sett out – the storye is fyne.
> The offeringe of Melchesadecke of bread and wine
> and the preservation thereof sett in youre playe.
> Suffer yow not in enye poynte the storye to decaye. ("The Late Banns…," lines 78–84)

According to Lawrence T. Clopper, the last three lines "raise the possibility that this is a late addition to the cycle or that it called for some defence because of the Catholic interpretation of Salem's king as the prototype of the priest" (237). In other words, either the whole episode could have been an addition to the already existing one revolving around Abraham and his son, or the Expositor's explanation of its significance could have been added or modified to counter the Catholic reading of the scene, with the Banns signalling the revision by asking the actors to render that defence faithfully.

In general, the consensus is that the figure of the Expositor was incorporated into the cycle at some point during its revisions in the 16th century. Peter Travis argues that the Expositor could have been added when the cycle was moved from Corpus Christi to Whitsuntide, which happened sometime in the first decades of the sixteenth century (47–48). Paul Whitfield White discerns a Protestant colouring to some of the Expositor's parts, believing that the extant versions of his speeches may have their origin in Edward's reign "when tensions over the Eucharist were at their highest in England" (2012, 130). Mills' analysis of the Expositor points to him propagating a clearly reformist message (2007) and Heather Hill-Vásquez speculates that it could have been right before its last performance in 1575 that the Expositor was added to the cycle (28). There is no conclusive evidence on the

matter, given that there are no manuscripts pre-dating the last performance that would preserve the plays featuring the Expositor and that, as Mills points out, we do not have access to the company accounts for those particular plays that would shed some light on the figure (2007, 314). There are, nonetheless, several indicators that the Expositor's speeches in play iv, as preserved in the extant late 16th- and early 17th-century manuscripts, could have been a post-Reformation addition or revision.

Play iv, although it combines three episodes removed in time, is nonetheless unified thematically, since the Expositor interprets all three episodes (Melchizedek and Abraham, God's promises to Abraham, Abraham and Isaac) as foreshadowing the three pillars of Christian life: the sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism as well as the obedience to God's "moste holye word" (*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, play iv, 78, line 477). While such emphases by no means counter Catholic doctrines, the focus on the only two sacraments recognized as such by the reformers, paired with an emphasis on the holy word of God, that is on the Scripture, may imply that the speeches given by the Expositor were added or edited to grant the play a reformist overtone.

Secondly, the Expositor sees Melchizedek as a prefiguration of neither Christ nor of a Catholic priest making a real offering during the Mass *in persona Christi*, which was the traditional interpretation of the Old Testament passage, but rather as a prefiguration of someone who symbolically commemorates the Last Supper. Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine is explained by the Expositor to be the opposite of the actual animal sacrifice popular at the time when the episode is set. That Melchizedek's actions are interpreted by the Expositor in a post-Reformation vein is implied by his phrasing and its emphasis on remembrance and the symbolic role of the act: "in bred and wyne his death remenber wee," "as nowe done wee, / in signification" (*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, play iv, 62, lines 126, 129–130) (Mills 2007, 315). The statements refer back to an analogous emphasis on remembrance in the Last Supper scene as prescribed by the Late Banns. Both fragments may be seen as attempts at differentiating the new understanding of the sacrament of Eucharist as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice and a form of its remembrance from the old, Catholic one, according to which the transubstantiation of bread and wine is an actual sacrifice made by Christ each time anew thanks to the words and gestures of a priest (Mills 2006, 222–224; White 2012, 130). Apparently, Goodman still found the reformed understanding missing when writing his letter of complaint back in 1572.

Finally, a comparison of the Expositor's speech after the Abraham and Isaac episode with its counterpart in the Brome version of the story is also quite telling. We know that the dramatic form of the Abraham and Isaac episode predates the rest of play iv since it is a rewriting of the Brome play of Abraham and Isaac (Mills 2007, 317). Chester does not diverge from its original substantially in terms of the dramatic qualities of the episode, but the concluding speech is changed

substantially. Among other modifications, while the Brome Doctor mentions adhering to God's commandments ("The Brome Play of Abraham and Isaac" 57, line 460), the Chester Expositor talks about the adherence to the holy word of God (*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, play iv, 78, line 477), putting emphasis more explicitly on the importance of the Bible at large.

The Expositor's interpretations add structure to the material presented, but the whole play remains heterogenous in terms of its theatrical qualities, which in itself may be an indicator of the palimpsestic character of the preserved text of the play. The episode with Melchizedek is a heavily dialogue-based post-climactic exchange of gifts that seems to be there only to lend itself to the figurative reading by the Expositor. The Abraham and Isaac episode, on the other hand, is very dynamic, with short exchanges between the father and son building tension and leading to a resolution. Props (sword, wood) are used and the action on stage is not limited to the characters talking to one another, but also includes Abraham binding Isaac, so both dialogues and physical action involving the bodies of the characters constitute the performance. The fragments in which the Expositor takes over the stage display yet another kind of performance aesthetics. His long speeches stand in contrast with Abraham and Isaac's short exchanges and they make little use of the variety of modes employed by performative arts.

The emotional impact produced by the characters' focus on their own and each other's feelings (e.g. "[Abraham:] O my harte will breake in three!"; "[Isaack:] But why make yee soe heavye chere? / Are ye any thynge adread?"; "[Isaack:] Father, I am full sore afrayde" (*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, play iv, 68, lines 253, 259, 265)) is reduced by the Expositor presenting the story as a figural representation of the New Testament events (Christ's sacrifice) rather than an actual story of a father attempting to kill his own child. When Isaac elicits from his father the true purpose of their journey up the hill, he begs Abraham not to kill him – he first suggests his father beats him instead if the killing is to be a form of punishment and then invokes his mother who he is sure would save him were she there (*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, play iv, 70). While Isaac's pleas for Abraham to spare him are aimed at evoking pity in his father and, by extension, also engage the audience, the Expositor builds a distance between the past story and its present signification.[2] The postponing of the execution by Isaac, who keeps coming up with new distractions once he learns what his father is planning to do, may be tragicomic in tone, but it nonetheless prolongs both his and his father's suffering, of which the audience is reminded time and again by Abraham, who expresses his heartache several times. The Expositor's shift away from the affective quality of the episode is clearly visible once his speech is compared to the speech delivered at the end of the Brome play of Abraham and Isaac. Where Brome's Doctor capitalizes on the affective power of the play and actually asks its audiences to put themselves in Abraham's shoes to bring home his moral ("The Brome Play of Abraham and Isaac" 56), the Expositor in Chester deflects the audience's attention from that

quality of the play. Unlike the Doctor from the Brome version, the Expositor does not focus on the actual human suffering of parents that lose their children to make use of the audience's ability to identify with such an emotional state. He rather explains, in a methodical manner, how to read the episode figuratively and what lesson in piety it teaches.

The Expositor plays an analogous role to the Late Banns, but the overall effect produced by both differs substantially. The post-Reformation Banns are an extra-textual attempt at modelling the audiences' response to the plays and drawing their attention to the significance of words spoken by the biblical characters, at the same time deemphasizing the spectacle (Mills 1998, 142). The Expositor, who seemingly tries to do the same,[3] but this time from within the play, ends up remodelling not only the response to the performance, but also its very format, making it less of a spectacle and more of a sermon.

One could argue that the tensions present in the cycles that underwent revisions in the 16th century are the result of the very process of rewriting. The attempts at reforming an already existing work could account for the resulting contradictions and the heterogeneous form of the texts. And yet the same kind of tension is to be found in the newly composed 16th-century plays written with the reformed religious message in mind. It is, in fact, the defining characteristic of the biblical drama of John Bale, whose uneasiness with the form of dramatic performance has been widely recognized in criticism. "The Chief Promises of God into Man (God's Promises)," with its neat, symmetrical structure designed to deliver its doctrinal message in a clear way, has been referred to as sermon-like (Blackburn 51) and "almost anti-dramatic" (Taylor 68). Thora Balslev Blatt states that Bale's biblical plays are only "dramatic to the extent that the account in the Bible on which they are based is dramatic" (qtd. in Taylor 79); Cathy Shrank diagnoses them as "explicitly aligned against spectacle" (186) and Peter Happé sees Bale as sharing the "Protestant suspicion of the speciousness of theatrical illusion" (7). James Simpson argues that Bale's plays are "driven and dissolved" by the paradox of them being drama "designed to kill drama stone dead" (109). Tamara Atkin observes that it has now amounted to a critical commonplace to recognize Bale's "deep ambivalence about drama as an artform reliant on embodied action" (244).

One way in which Bale's plays control their doctrinal message is through employing the expositor figure of Baleus Prolocutor, Bale's onstage persona whose speeches frame his biblical plays: "God's Promises," which is a series of dialogues of God with biblical characters, "John Baptist's Preaching in the Wilderness" and "The Temptation of Our Lord." Baleus' prologues and epilogues expound the meaning of the works and point out the corrupted nature of the Catholic faith. But even when the Prolocutor is not there to give his commentary, Bale's biblical plays oftentimes boil down to the characters debating onstage, providing elaborate argumentation, and backing it up with the authority of the Scripture (Shrank 186–187). The plays thus govern the audience's understanding of the events unfolding and encourage

"active thinking about their belief" and "a personal scrutiny of the Word" (Happé 10). The tendency, similar to that in the Norwich Fall of Man and the scenes with the Expositor in Chester, is for Bale's plays to frequently resort to explaining instead of just showing and making the audience interpret the events for themselves.

Bale's Prolocutor and his other characters interpret the events presented in the plays and lay out the doctrine that stems from them, but their preference for telling over showing also manifests itself in their summarizing of the events that are not part of the performance, their role being in this respect once again analogous to that of the Expositor from the Chester Cycle, who is sometimes employed to abridge and link the biblical episodes in his speeches (Mills 2007, 318–319) or to the Norwich Prolocutor, who summarizes the preceding events at the beginning of his play to put it in a broader biblical context. Bale's "God's Promises" spans the whole Old Testament and part of the New Testament, and while each of the seven acts has one biblical figure as their focal point, the character of God (and sometimes also the character that God converses with) opens the subsequent parts with summarizing the biblical events that are supposed to have happened in-between the acts, thus granting continuity to the story told. Bale refers to the process of writing the play as "compiling" in a note at the end, thus emphasizing that the play is supposed to be a faithful rendering of the compiled biblical material more than its creative rewriting (Shrank 183). Bale aims at chronological accuracy even if, or perhaps precisely because, that involves giving up on the spectacle and just overviewing a large time span in a single monologue, which distances the audience from the represented world through underlining the temporal gap between their present and the biblical past.[4]

3. Bale's "Three Laws" and Wager's *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*

The distancing of the world of the audience from that presented on stage deemphasizes the role of the plays as an adaptation of the scriptural material into a different medium, one that re-enacts the events and makes them unfold in real time, inviting the audience to be part of those events now and again, as mystery plays did. Instead, the plays are made to resemble a homiletic form of biblical paraphrase and commentary. This is aimed at settling Bale's, and by extension the audiences,' doubts concerning the effectiveness of the dramatic form in disseminating the word of God. Conversely, the moments when the plays lean toward the traditional modes employed by their late medieval dramatic counterparts bring those anxieties to the fore. Atkin and Simpson both illustrate that with an example from "Three Laws, of Nature, Moses and Christ," a play drawing more from the tradition of the morality play than of the mystery play, but still closely related to the Bible as its allegory expresses the rightful role of the Old Testament (represented by the characters of

The Law of Nature and The Law of Moses) and the New Testament (The Law of Christ) in Christian faith. In the play, the character of Infidelity devises some theatrical tricks to fight its opponent, The Law of Christ, and instructs its minions on how to perform those. We know that Bale himself impersonated Infidelity when the play was staged, but even without the connection between the chief Vice of the play and its author and director having been underlined in this way, the disturbing analogy would still be quite self-evident – the role of a playwright and director that Infidelity assumes is associated with creating deceitful and manipulative illusion (Atkin 254; Simpson 112, 119).

An analogous disapproval of some aspects of the theatre is conveyed when the play exploits the convention of boys' cross-dressing on stage "to denounce sexual relations between men associated with that very transvestism" (White 2008, 101) or when Infidelity sings his entrance song, most likely to an "upbeat tune breaking the auditory monotony of a performance that had until that point consisted only of formal dialogue about commandments," instantly making himself "the most compelling and likable character onstage" (Brokaw 328). The song and the following exchange with Natural Law casts Infidelity in the role of a street peddler who is willing to palm others off with anything, including Catholic devotional items – such as "paxe" or "ymage of waxe" (Brokaw 328). Infidelity, as peddler and performer, uses the allure of the song to achieve its dubious goals. The question then arises how to distinguish Infidelity's devious use of a song as a bait from Bale's use of that same song to win his audiences' attention.[5] By presenting Infidelity as a deceitful, manipulative entertainer and associating the character with the Catholic faith on the one hand, and by using metatheatrical allusions linking Infidelity with the role of playwright and director on the other hand, the play reveals some suspicion towards theatre as reformers' tool to disseminate new beliefs.

Perhaps one exception to the rule that anything theatrical would undermine itself or confuse the doctrinal message could be Bale's use of signs in "God's Promises." As Happé notes, a tangible sign is mentioned in each episode that is to symbolize a covenant, and at least one of those, a dove, could also be a stage prop (10). This approach to stage props as signs also within the represented world of the play may be seen as a way of circumventing the confusion as to whether representation on stage is true or false – since the role of the dove both within the represented world of the play and on the level of its use as a prop is the same (it serves as a symbol of something else in both cases, i.e. it signifies something), the problem of the inherent falsehood of onstage representation is bypassed. In other words, in this case the resort to a performance-related mode indeed supports the message instead of confusing it or going against it. The question remains as to what extent such a fine conceptual (and structuralist) differentiation between props standing for real objects and props standing for other signs could be clear to the audiences, especially when set against the explicit criticism of any kind of theatricality, with no such subtle distinctions, in "Three Laws."

Another potential exception, also to be found in "God's Promises," is the inclusion of seven antiphons, that is, pieces of musical performance that add variety to its otherwise monotonously repetitive structure of long, information-loaded exchanges between God and biblical characters. On the one hand, the use of the antiphons may be argued to prove "that musical ritual grounded in clear scriptural understanding is consistent with the principles of Protestant reform" (Brokaw 345). On the other hand, one could contend that it is not in fact an exception because we are dealing here with "Catholic-leaning liturgical music" (Brokaw 345), which, arguably, proves Bale to be "only able to produce the old faith's sounds almost exactly," exposing a "gap between the reformed ideal and the little changed practice" (Brokaw 346), thus once again making an element enhancing the performance undermine the play's reformist agenda. While agreeing with Happé that Bale's dramatic method helps "to drive home the doctrine" (10), and recognizing that there may be single exceptions to the overall tendency as to what this method consists in, I join most critics who believe that its essence is not to "enhance the theatricality of the plays" as Happé has it (10), but actually to supress it, and that when it is not supressed, it confuses the doctrinal message.

The tension between the need for an entertaining performance and for a clear didactic message is discernible in other reformist plays, for example in Lewis Wager's *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*, published in 1566, though most probably Edwardian in origin (Carpenter 28). That the right doctrine would be delivered and well understood was supposed to be granted by many expository speeches by allegorical characters that made Mary Magdalene into a negative exemplum first and then made sure her transformation would be appreciated (Carpenter 30–31). All that is set against the scenes of Mary Magdalene's erotically charged interactions with Vices or her trying out different fancy costumes. White recognizes that the intention of the play, as is the case with Vice comedy in general, could be to expose the audience to the same temptations that the main character was subject to, to later evoke the feelings of guilt and repentance in them, but he casts some doubt as to whether the final effect achieved in the performance and the audiences' response to it could indeed be controlled to such an extent (2008, 100). Just as it would require an already in-depth knowledge and reflection on the part of the audience to contemplate the complex nature of Bale's props as signs referring to signs rather than real objects, so here the play would need to set its expectations on the implied audience very high to count on this kind of self-reflexive response. Overall, rather than a successful incorporation of spectacle to promote the Protestant message, White sees the play as illustrating "the potential disjuncture between the theory and the practice of religious propaganda on the stage, a disjuncture in which the intended 'message' may have been subverted by elements within the text itself and by the interpretation that text was given in performance" (2008, 101).

4. "The History of Jacob and Esau"

While some post-Reformation plays, such as Bale's "The Temptation of Our Lord," prioritize the non-confusing expounding of the doctrinal message over the attractiveness of the dramatic performance, and others, like *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* or "Three Laws," give up their coherence to oscillate between the edifying sermonizing and entertaining spectacle, "The History of Jacob and Esau," a school play published in 1568, takes yet another direction. Its doctrinal affiliation is proclaimed in the prologue, which states explicitly that the story to follow illustrates the doctrine of predestination:

> But before Jacob and Esau yet born were,
> Or had either done good, or ill perpetrate :
> As the prophet Malachi and Paul witness bear,
> Jacob was chosen, and Esau reprobate :
> Jacob I love (saith God) and Esau I hate.
> For it is not (saith Paul) in man's renewing or will,
> But in God's mercy, who chooseth whom he will ("The History of Jacob and Esau" 3)

Yet, the play is not only to demonstrate how predestination works in practice, but also to "delight" the "eyes and ears" of the audience (3). Indeed, the drama is designed to be an engaging and attractive performance: the actors are instructed to wear period costumes (the characters are "considered to be Hebrews and so should be apparelled with attire" (2)); the play is interspersed with songs that require vocal and performative skills on actors' part (White 2008, 102); the plot is well developed and not a mere pretext to expound the doctrine; and all of the above, together with the "engaging realism of the play," with its "naturalistic characterization" (Carpenter 33), point to the experience of watching the play as a potentially immersive one. The immersion is also facilitated by there being no expositor-like figure or other character intruding into the play itself to disrupt the action on stage and comment upon the events unfolding. The prologue does interpret the meaning of the whole story beforehand, but then, apart from slipping in the idea that God's ways are beyond human understanding in songs and Isaac's remarks, the play needs to rely on the characterization and dramatization of the events to convey its doctrinal message of predestination and to prove that the Poet who delivered the Prologue was right (Carpenter 32).

According to Sarah Carpenter, the shift away from the neutral tone of the biblical account encourages the audience to make judgments about the eponymous brothers (33). As the events of the play unfold, Esau emerges as a "loutish and inconsiderate figure, roughly dismissive of his brother and despised by most of the community for his antisocial behaviour" and Jacob as "pious and submissive" (33). White sees the division as a clear-cut one: Esau "is as wicked as Jacob is

unswervingly righteous" (2008, 103). Yet this kind of presentation, as Carpenter argues, obscures the doctrinal certainty of the prologue (33). If it is Jacob's actions that are supposed to help the audience see him as the elect one, and if Esau's behaviour is supposed to prove he deserves to be condemned, then the play could as well serve as an illustration of salvation by works. Were it not for the explicit interpretation that opens and closes the play, its doctrinal affiliation would not be that easy to determine.

An alternative approach is suggested by John E. Curran, who argues that the play indeed "goes well beyond the Bible in casting the elect Jacob as pious and innocent and the reprobate Esau as wicked and blameworthy" (285), but does so only superficially to eventually prove the point made in the prologue. The message of the prologue is conveyed, according to Curran, by means of making its characters either models or antimodels of the perception of Jacob and Esau and of the play at large. The servants and neighbours who judge Esau based on his actions are such antimodels, as is Jacob and Esau's mother, Rebecca, who is right in accepting God's plan for Jacob to receive his father's blessing, but wrong in trying to find a justification for that plan in her sons' merit or lack thereof (Curran 292–296, 299). A character that in turn truly understands the will of God is the boys' father Isaac, who is literally blind in the play, but also metaphorically blind to his children's good or bad disposition. Rather than relying on his judgment of who deserves his blessing more, he leaves the decision to God's providence, passively submitting himself to whatever is going to happen (Curran 295–298). This reading leads Curran to conclude that the play not only teaches a general lesson in trusting the divine plan and not trying to understand predestination through the prism of human moral judgments, but is also, at the same time, a metatheatrical commentary on the appropriate reception of the play itself.

That lesson is, however, problematic to put in practice. On the one hand, the audience should not be like Rebecca or one of the servants in trying to analyse the actions of the characters and then to root for whichever they sympathize with more based on what they learned about them. The alternative, however, which is following Isaac's suit, comes down to not trusting this, or any theatrical representation at all. Jacob dresses up as his brother, plays his role in front of his father, and even uses props (food that is supposed to imitate the meat that Esau would procure, since he as a hunter brings his father venison when he sees him). If we read Jacob's performance as a play within a play, metatheatrically representing the play "The History of Jacob and Esau," and if we assume, after Curran, that Isaac is a model recipient of the play, then the scene becomes a commentary on the efforts of the theatre that are, in fact, in vain. Jacob makes some attempts at a spectacularly realistic representation of his brother through his hairy costume that is to imitate the feel of Esau's body and the tasty, aromatic food he brings. Given that the decision is not Isaac's but God's, Jacob's efforts are effective and yet unnecessary, because irrespective of what he may have done, he would have received his father's blessing.

This is because Isaac is as little dependent on the stimuli from his other senses as he is on his impaired vision. Isaac is not sure which son he is talking to – he feels that he is hugging Esau and smells and tastes the food that seems to be brought by him, but says he can hear Jacob's voice – and yet he does not bother to determine which elements of what we as the audience know to be Jacob's performance are true and which are his mistaken interpretation. Instead, he ignores them all, because apparently he does not trust his judgment of the situation anyway. If one draws Curran's reading to its further logical conclusion, the legitimacy of any attempts that the play "The History of Jacob and Esau" makes at realistic representation and characterisation, as well as at effective spectacle and at conveying the true doctrine, are thus undermined by the play itself. The ultimate aporia of this reading of the intended message of the play is that while it is supposed to discourage the audience from making judgments about Jacob's merits and Esau's lack thereof, it still presents the viewers with anti-models they should recognize as such and a role model, Isaac, whose actions in the play need to be judged and deemed right in order for the conclusion that we are in no position to make such judgments to be drawn. To put it in yet another way, we need to figure out when the play tries to deceive us and when it gives a true lesson in order to understand its message, but then we need to know the message of the play beforehand in order to determine when the play is misleading.

The two alternative paths are to either see the play, after Michael O'Connell and Patrick Collinson, as a revival of the genuine mystery cycle tradition (O'Connell 104) that does not reveal any unease with its medium (Collinson 98), or, following Curran, as problematizing its theatricality after all. However, no matter whether one follows the more straightforward reading which assumes that the audience can tell which of the brothers deserves their sympathy based on their characterization in the play, or a subversive one, according to which the whole point of the play is to convince the audience not to make such judgments as humans are in no position to do so, the emerging conclusion is that theatre can hardly be reconciled with the doctrinal message that the prologue to the play conveys.

5. The Medium is the (Doctrinal) Message

While both pre- and post-Reformation biblical plays adapted the Scripture into the medium of dramatic performance, they did so with a different attitude to their source material. Compared to the late medieval cycle plays, post-Reformation biblical drama went to great lengths to underline its direct links with the biblical text. The new emphasis put on the plays' close adherence to their source material was related to the changing attitude to the role and model reception of the Bible itself. Carpenter sees the latter shift as one from encouraging a more affective and devotional attitude to a primarily intellectual one (17). These two different

positions from which the laity was to approach the Scripture are reflected in the biblical drama itself, as are the changing circumstances of assimilating it, i.e. the shift away from the Bible as part of the communal ritual and towards a more private experience stemming from individual responsibility (Hill-Vásquez 20). Pre-Reformation cycle plays indeed used biblical content to promote affective piety and to serve the communal needs, and post-Reformation drama, although deriving from that same tradition, was very much preoccupied with granting their audiences' understanding of their theological message. Plays such as Bale's "God's Promises" or the "B" version of "The Norwich Grocer's Play" tend to make the experience of watching them more like reading the Scripture or a commentary to it than taking part in a ritual.

Based on the analysis of what the parcels, that is copies of parts to be learned by a given actor, would look like for selected characters from the Chester Annunciation and Nativity, Margaret Rogerson argues that affective piety may be considered as the acting method for the players in the pre-Reformation Chester cycle (93). She notes that the practice of affective piety encouraged casting oneself in the biblical stories as a side character who observes the events in close proximity. This applies to the characters played by the Cestrians, but also to the viewers of the Chester plays as well as of the other pre-Reformation biblical cycles, who were cast in that exact position of eyewitnesses by the plays. Affective piety may thus be considered the "method" for medieval actors, as well as a model for the reception of the plays by the audiences, the latter being a well-established link in the scholarship on the mystery plays, as Rogerson shows (101–102). In this sense, affective piety, a form of late medieval piety, is the foundation for the experience of participating in the cycle, either as an actor or a member of the audience.

Rogerson analyzes how the parcels for actors impersonating the confounded Mary during the Visitation or Salome, a doubting midwife assisting in Christ's birth, encourage emotional engagement and in this way demonstrates that such an engagement would involve and actually embrace doubt and confusion as facilitating identification and involvement. Isaac in play iv can be added to the list of the characters from the Chester cycle that embody distrust towards the legitimacy of actions of the holy figures on-stage. As Isaac starts inquiring what his father's plan is, demands answers, and becomes more and more frightened and confused as to his father's intentions, his doubts become the focal point of the play. In the spirit of affective piety, the doubting characters on-stage reveal the plays' openness to an analogous journey from doubting and confusion to insight on the part of the audience. A major consequence of the post-Reformation need for biblical drama to elicit an intellectual response and to promote the correct understanding of the significance of the Bible as the source of the new doctrines was that such an expectation left no room for any kind of doubt on the part of the participants. The side effect of the post-Reformation attempts at eliminating doubt was, in turn, a shift away from some essential elements of the dramatic performance.

One obvious feature of dramatic performance that intensifies the uncertainty is the real-time unfolding of the events. The performance, unlike, for example, a narrative told by an omniscient narrator who signals to the reader that they already know the story, produces a sense of immediacy and thus increases suspense (Berry; qtd. in Mills 2007, 316). The suspense serves well to engage the audience emotionally but runs the risk of them making wrong assumptions without having the full picture from the start. The post-Reformation plays discussed above, such as the "B" text of "The Norwich Grocers' Play," *Marie Magdalene*, or "The History of Jacob and Esau," make sure to eliminate that risk by revealing the endings and morals of the plays already in their prologues.

Yet another measure taken in the plays discussed is to distance the audience from the events enacted with the use of the figures of interpreters that clearly mark the distinction between the two time planes with their intrusive commentaries and summaries. Apart from the pragmatic issue of time constraints, the resort to compiling and summarizing instead of acting the events out may have been driven by the need to give primacy to the written word of the Bible over spectacle (Simpson 120), as well as by the newly emerging emphasis on the historicity of the biblical events that carried with it an obligation to report them faithfully and chronologically. The translating of the new approach to the Bible as a chronicle into Scripture-based plays produced "a temporal gap between the present of performance and the biblical past" (Taylor 61–62), adding to the distancing effect evoked by the very presence of a figure mediating between the represented world of the plays and their audiences. Pre-Reformation biblical drama did the exact opposite when it selectively chose single biblical episodes and then, when enacting them, drew the represented world of its plays anachronistically close to the reality of its viewers, placing the creation of communally shared participatory experience over the historical (i.e. biblical) accuracy. The examples of that technique vary and include the conflation of the biblical past and the audiences' present in the portrayal of the characters and their conditions (like in the Towneley "The Second Shepherds' Play") or making the audience part of the performance (like in the York address of the crucified Christ to the crowds or in the Chester speech of Moses which casts the medieval audience in the role of the people of Israel).

The zeal with which the Chester Expositor and the speaker in its post-Reformation banns emphasize the role of the Eucharist as remembrance hints at the relationship between the shift in the doctrinal interpretation of the sacrament of the Eucharist and the more and more pronounced distancing of the audience from the biblical plays. As Taylor observes,

> where the mass was also traditionally thought of as a "miraculous" recreation of past events, Zwinglian or Swiss reformers replaced notions of the Eucharist as the ritual re-sacrifice of the Real Presence with the historical contingency of Christ's death, once-for-all in a temporal as well as theological framework. (83)

The audiences' "real presence," i.e., their atemporal participation in the biblical events seems to be deemphasized once the new understanding of the Bible as a chronicle and the Eucharist as remembrance are more and more widely adopted.

A source of doubt even more fundamentally linked to the very medium of biblical plays and not only their genre is the fact that anything represented on stage has the same status – a representation and not the actual thing being represented. This is regardless of whether a play wants to depict something as true or false. The depiction of falsehood on stage actually draws attention to the fact that the same kind of illusion is used to represent truth. This issue has been explored by Kelly in her insightful case study of the 16th-century allegorical play *Conflict of Conscience*, which brings her to the conclusion that "early modern writers ultimately became aware of the tendency of theatrical performances of religious experience to highlight the instability of religious identity" (2014, 390). This is because "the nature of dramatic performance means that staging religious subject matter always raises questions about the significance of ritual, prayer, and other outward shows of faith, whether undertaken by Catholics or Protestants" (2014, 405). In other words, if an anti-Catholic treatise condemns Catholic rituals as a spectacle devoid of true faith, that point may be fairly taken, but if a performance stages "false" faith as a mere theatrical show, it puts into question its own theatricality and its ability to ever tell the truth (2014, 413; see also Kelly 2012, 59–63). Theatre that teaches new doctrines, that is new truths, at the same time enacting the falsities of the old ones, like Bale's drama or *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene*, by definition subverts itself since it is unable to make the distinction between the true and rightful and false and condemnable representation from within its own medium, where both have the same status. It is therefore not able to contain the potential for doubt in its reception. "The History of Jacob and Esau," which aims at postulating a new, Calvinist model for the production and reception of theatrical performance of religious content, ends up postulating nonparticipation in such drama.

6. Conclusion

The post-Reformation biblical drama of the 16th century was both a continuation of, and a departure from, the tradition of the late medieval mystery play. By the look of it, the genre of biblical drama could seem tailored to promote the Bible in the vernacular and teach new doctrines derived directly from the interpretation of the Scripture. However, post-Reformation plays, in their attempts at appropriating the genre to pursue its reformist, didactic goals, encountered a great challenge, since it was not only the content but also the form of biblical drama that was designed to serve a different purpose than the one envisaged by the reformers. Thus, trying to cash in on the popularity of cycle drama, playwrights faced a fundamental obstacle – the defining features of both its genre and its medium worked against, and not in

support of, the new doctrines. That resulted in some attempts at modifying the genre and negotiating the use of the medium of theatrical performance, but with the plays revealing their "unease with the stage as a forum in which to address the Bible" (Carpenter 12), the project eventually turned out to be a self-defeating one.

The general pattern emerging from the analyses undertaken and summarized in the present study seems to be that the more successful a play is in carrying the doctrinal message, the further it departs from the genre of the mystery play and the less effective it tends to become as a performance. Conversely, the plays that are satisfactory as theatre become confusing in terms of their intended doctrinal message. This is hardly surprising given that the format of a Scripture-based play was devised when a different doctrine shaped its content, but another thing is that biblical drama was designed as one ingrained in an already well known and popular form of piety, and so it was not expected to convince and convert. This may be one of the reasons why it turned out to be less effective as a tool of disseminating entirely new sets of beliefs and forms of religiousness, irrespective of which particular reformist thinkers and denominations the playwrights or revisers strove to promote. As one 16th-century anti-theatrical author argues, if a group of university students found a play they watched to be a chastening experience, "it came more of somewhat which they brought thither, then which they found there" (qtd. in Kelly 2014, 416). Pre-Reformation biblical drama relied on what the audiences brought with them and thus could afford more doubt and uncertainty than the reformers were perhaps willing to accept in their plays. However, while biblical drama may have proven to be unsatisfactory as a tool to disseminate the new teachings and contain the accompanying doubts, that is, to prescriptively summon up the new spirit of its times, it definitely helps to understand and describe the actual, confused nature of 16th-century popular piety in England and of the still unformed religious *Zeitgeist* in transition.

Notes

1 The extant manuscripts include: Hm Huntington Library manuscript 2 (1591), A BL Additional 10305 (1592), R BLHarley2013 (1600), B Bodleian Library, Bodley 175 (1604), H BL Harley2124 (1607). Apart from those, there are four surviving manuscripts preserving single plays or fragments (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, ix–xxvii). The manuscripts exhibit some minor, though at times telling differences, for example MS R missing lines that would indicate that one of the characters saved during the last judgment is a pope (White 2012, 126–127), or MS H being the only one that contains Mary's speech about her special role and her willingness to die and be with her son (i.e. a reference to her Assumption) (Lumiansky and Mills 1983, 37–38). However, no systematic pattern emerges as to any single manuscript being consistently

more post-Reformation in character than the others. Lumiansky and Mills' theory is that alternative versions of the differing fragments were there in the Exemplar – a copy from which all the surviving manuscripts of the entire cycle originate – and the differences stem from either conscious or unconscious editorial choices of the scribes rewriting it (Lumiansky and Mills 1983, 23, 85).

2 The temporal and emotional distancing of the audience from the plays by the Expositor has been discussed by Walter, Mills (2007), Hill-Vásquez, and Christie.

3 See Hill-Vásquez 25–50 for an in-depth discussion of how the Expositor reshapes the reception aesthetics of the cycle.

4 See Taylor for an in-depth analysis of the relationship of Bale's biblical drama with history.

5 See Brokaw 329–331 for more examples of the use of songs in the play that serve to mock Catholicism and so undermine the legitimacy of singing as part of a "truly" religious play.

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