Chaucer's records of early English drama

[Note: The New Chaucer Society met at the University of British Columbia in August, 1988. The central idea of the conference was to set Chaucer in his context in the late fourteenth century. Martin Stevens organized a session on drama for which this paper was prepared.]

In the light of the radical changes that have taken place in our understanding of the late medieval dramatic tradition in England over the last twenty-five years, the notes in various editions of Chaucer's works to the line in the prologue to the Miller's Tale, 'But in Pilates voyes he gan to crie' (i (A) 3124) and to the detail that Absolon played 'Herodes upon a scaffold hye' (i (A) 3384) make fascinating reading. Robinson, as usual the soul of caution, says of the Miller that he had a 'voice like that of the ranting Pilate in the mystery plays' and that Absolon 'took the part of Herod in a mystery play'.

A. C. Cawley notes that the Miller's voice is a 'reference to the ranting Pilate of the Corpus Christi Plays' and that Absolon played 'the part of Herod in a miracle play on a stage high above the ground.'

Baugh asserts that 'In the medieval mystery plays, Pilate usually rants' and Fisher goes even further to say that 'Pontius Pilate was a roaring part in the mystery plays' and refers to Herod also as a 'roaring bully'.

James Winny in a school text edition of the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale is even more assertive about the nature of late fourteenth-century drama. In a note to the lines,

``Therfore I made my visitaciouns
To Vigiles and to processiouns,
To prechyng eek, and to thise pilgrimages,
To pleyes of miracles, and to mariages,
And wered upon my gaye scarlet gytes. (iii (D) 555-9)``

he writes, 'Miracle plays, the popular drama of the age. Portraying events in a dramatic cycle from the Creation to the Last Judgment, these plays were a mixture of piety and broad farce, enlivened with figures from folk-lore as well as from religious sources'.

Chaucer scholarship has long accepted the understanding that the drama flourished
in the fourteenth century and that we have the texts of the mystery plays to prove it – one of which, the Chester Cycle, dates from about 1325. Chaucer makes allusion to the plays because not only did he see them but his audience was equally familiar with them and had, like the Wife of Bath, spent long summer days watching them. Much has been made, particularly by Beryl Rowland, of the parody of the Noah plays and the Nativity plays that can be seen as an underlying thread in the structure of the Miller’s Tale. I have myself spent considerable time in my undergraduate Chaucer classes on the contrast between the aristocratic mimetic activity represented by the tournaments of the Knight’s Tale and the allusions to the bourgeois drama in the Miller’s Tale. However, recent work in early drama scholarship has shown that it is by no means clear from any other evidence that the tradition that Chaucer so allusively and brilliantly uses in this tale even existed in the fourteenth century. Far from being commonplace, these references in the Miller’s Tale and the Wife of Bath’s Tale are among the earliest extant references to Biblical drama in England and as such are important records of early English drama.

The dramatic tradition in England, of course, stretches back to the Regularis Concordia in the tenth century, but that tradition is a liturgical one. There is also evidence of an Anglo-Norman drama in England with such plays as the Jeu d’Adam. Processions, disguisings, summer games, elaborate mimetic royal entries and some courtly entertainment are sparsely documented in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries except for the repeated ecclesiastical prohibitions copied over and over again in the statute books of English bishops by industrious scribes following their copy text. These prohibitions against the involvement of the clergy in ‘ludos inhonestos’ find their English expression in Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s lines,

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{\begin{align*}
\text{byt} \text{ is forbode hym, yn \ } & \text{he decr,} \\
\text{Myracles for to make or se;} \\
\text{For, myracles 3yf bou bygynne,} \\
\text{Hyt ys a gaderyng, a syght of synne,} \\
\text{he may yn cherche purgh p\ys resun,} \\
\text{Pley \ } & \text{be resurreccyun,} \\
\text{hat ys to seye, how God ros,} \\
\text{God and man yn my3t and los,} \\
\text{To make men be yn beleue gode} \\
\text{hat he ros with fleshe and blode;} \\
\text{And he may pleye, withoutyn plyght} \\
\text{howe God was bore yn 3ole nyght,} \\
\text{To make men to beleue stedfastly} \\
\text{hat he lyght in \ } & \text{he vyrgyne Mary.}
\end{align*}}
\]

This passage clearly differentiates between the liturgical dramatic celebrations of Easter and Christmas and other plays here given their common medieval title of ‘miracle play’. We know, therefore, that there was some tradition other than the liturgical one but its nature is not clear. Nor did it become clear until well after 1400.

The major change that has come about in the study of early English drama in the second half of the twentieth century is the radical redating of the Chester cycle. F.M. Salter first debunked the tradition of the great antiquity of Chester apparently deliberately perpetrated by seventeenth-century civic antiquarians who dated the cycle 1325. Salter redated the plays to the last quarter of the fourteenth century. Larry Clopper, however, in his work for the Chester volume in the Records of Early English Drama series has dated the text that has survived to us as after 1521. This dating is concurred with by R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills in their work associated with the new EETS edition of the cycle. There is evidence that there was a Passion Play performed in a single location by the clergy in the fifteenth century but no earlier record of drama in Chester survives.
Since Salters work in the 1950s there have been major reconsiderations of the Biblical drama tradition in England. This has come about through three separate but inter-related approaches to the subject – the collection of documentary evidence in the REED project, the increasing frequency of the performance of these plays and the re-editing of each of the four major collections of Biblical drama – those manuscripts we once confidently referred to as the four English cycles. This has led us to the conclusion that none of the texts predates the third quarter of the fifteenth century and that only two – York and Chester – were ever meant to be performed as sequences. The other two manuscripts, Towneley and N-Town, are increasingly being considered anthologies deliberately organized in the order from Creation to Judgment but drawn from episodes of varying provenance and performing traditions. When these new insights are set beside the ‘non-Cycle’ texts edited by Norman Davis, the situation has radically changed from the facile assumptions of the early part of this century. The fact of the matter is that we have only one manuscript of a play in English that can be dated by the handwriting or the language before 1400 – that is the morality the Pride of Life probably of Irish origin – and two early fourteenth-century fragments from East Anglia, the Cambridge Prologue in French and English (that could be an introduction to almost any form of public entertainment) and the Bury St Edmunds fragment of a few stanzas also in French and English of what appears to be a Christmas play.

Chaucerians may not find it disturbing to have practically no manuscript evidence before the first quarter of the fifteenth century. After all, all the Chaucer manuscripts are of a provenance later than the poet’s lifetime. But we know when Chaucer lived. We have the life records, sparse though they may be, and we can anchor his poetry firmly in space and time. For those of us who work in early drama, however, with no named playwrights and very few fixed locations, it is very easy to begin to assume that the tradition itself did not exist before 1400. There is, after all, very little firm evidence for large scale productions before that time.

The scepticism about the existence of the drama in the fourteenth century was heightened in the 1970s by the challenge presented by Alan Nelson to the traditional understanding of the performance of the York cycle in procession, twelve times at fixed stations through the streets of York. That challenge has, I believe, been met by the publication in the first REED collection of all the surviving evidence concerning the York play which clearly demonstrates that the play was indeed done in the traditional manner. Nevertheless, Nelson’s challenge, which posited a procession of pageants followed by a play played once in a fixed location, has had a lingering effect. No one familiar with the history of the controversy will ever assume again that a procession of pageants automatically means plays in the formal sense. We have learned that there are as many possibilities – from mere display, through mimed action to actual dramatic episodes – that could be represented by records of pageants connected with a summer festival as there are locations that produced them. Nor will anyone assume that the pageants necessarily represent what has come to be called, somewhat mistakenly I now believe, a Corpus Christi play. There is only one play that follows an episodic pattern from Creation to Doomsday. The play at Coventry was played on Corpus Christi but it began with the Nativity; the play at Newcastle, as far as we know, was never a complete sequence; and the exact nature of the event at Beverley remains obscure. Many other kinds of plays were played at Corpus Christi but we should not think of the Biblical plays as a genre called a Corpus Christi Play. Nor was the normal mode of performance in England a pageant wagon. Absolon’s performance on a scaffold high is, in fact, emerging as the more usual method of production from the fifteenth-century records.

But to return to the fourteenth century evidence – there is very little hard evidence of the performance of Biblical drama or saints’ plays during Chaucer’s lifetime. A new reference has come to light through the research done for the REED Cumberland collection.
that gives evidence of a miracle play being performed in the market place in Carlisle in 1345. The Corpus Christi Guild of Cambridge performed a play called 'ludo filiorum Israel' once only in 1353. In 1360, the parishioners of West Wittenham in Berkshire near Oxford performed, possibly, at Exeter College – but that was probably a folk play. In 1377, at Bicester Priory also near Oxford there was a performance of a 'magnus ludus' on a Sunday in July. An interlude is recorded at King's Lynn on Corpus Christi, 1384, and in that same year a play on St Thomas the Martyr was also performed in Lynn. In 1389 there is evidence of a play on Corpus Christi in Bury St Edmunds, and in 1398 a play was performed for the abbot of Selby. In all, we have eight references in sixty years from all over the country to single plays that could be biblical plays.

Other evidence for the plays that came to dominate the history of drama in the fifteenth century does not begin until the 1370s. A reference to a Christmas play in the Hospital of St Leonard in York in 1370 is apparently unrelated to the first evidence of the cycle play which comes in 1376 with a small item concerning the storage of a pageant wagon. In that same year one William Thorp, a clerk in York, leaves his play books and the cupboard they are stored in to one Richard Yedingham, if he will have them. In 1377, the first reference from Beverley is contained in an ordinance of the Tailors' guild to their play on Corpus Christi. The first guild evidence for the Corpus Christi pageants at York is from 1386 and the next year a settlement of a dispute between the Carpenters and the Skinners over the storage of wagons is recorded in the civic memorandum book. In 1389, the York Pater Noster Guild provides evidence to an official of Richard II about their Pater Noster Play and in that same year we learn that some pageants are being stored in the archbishop's palace in York. It is not until 1394 that there is any indication of what the pageants are being used for. In that year fines are established to be imposed on those pageants of Corpus Christi that do not play 'in locis antiquitus assignatis'. Five years later, in 1399, the places are specified in the civic memorandum book and remain the same until the suppression of the cycle in 1568. I have been the principal of an undergraduate college long enough to know that an innovation that is only two years old can become instant tradition in the eyes of the students. For this reason, I am hesitant to place too much emphasis on the antiquity of the assignments referred to in 1394. Nevertheless, something of some size was taking place in York in the last decade of the fourteenth century although the first comprehensive evidence for the nature of that event does not occur until the famous Ordo Paginarum in 1415. Indeed, there are those who argue that the Ordo is only a list of pageants and could represent a series of dumb shows that eventually evolved into the play that we have by mid-century.

An ordinance by the Governors of Beverley was sent to 39 named crafts in 1390 'to be ready to perform every Corpus Christi day' again according to an 'antiquam consuetudinem'. No details of the play at Beverley appear until 1431 and the editor of the Beverley records for Reed, Diana Wyatt, is not at all sure that the 1390 reference represents anything more than a procession. The first reference to a play in Coventry is 1392 and consists again of a small reference to a pageant wagon and the first reference to a continuing non-liturgical drama in Lincoln comes from 1397.

This, then, is what might be called the 'hard' evidence for the kind of drama performed by the Miller and Absolon and attended by the Wife of Bath and Jankyn from Chaucer's lifetime. But what of the evidence for the famous plays at Clerkenwell? Only one reference to those plays is what I have considered 'hard evidence'. That is a reference in a proclamation by the mayor and aldermen of London in 1385 prohibiting 'the performance of the play that customarily took place at Skennereswelle or any other such play ... until news of the king's venture against Scotland'. There is a reference to the plays at Skinners Well in Higden's Polychronicon for 1384 and two are in Stow's Survey: one for 1390 that indicates that the event lasted over three days and included a 'play of the Passion of our Lord and the Creation of the World' and one in the next
year that lasted for four days of episodes from the Old and New Testament. Such
chronicle references published almost two hundred years after the events recorded -
years when the tradition had indeed flowered into large scale episodic plays all over
Europe - do not seem to me to carry the same weight as references whose intention
was to record a payment for something that really happened or to record the settlement
of a dispute in which the play reference is incidental. These chronicle references are
particularly odd because there is no similar drama recorded in London after 1411.40

There are other allusions, however, to playmaking during Chaucer’s lifetime that do
argue for the existence of a tradition of Biblical drama. In a sermon ascribed to Bromyard,
the preacher inveighs against those who prefer new shows (‘nouis spectaculis’), ‘as in
the plays which they call the “Miracles”’ produced by ‘foolish clerics’, to pious
exercises.41 In a political poem of about the same time, ‘Squires dress proudly; “Hii
ben degised as turmentours that comen from clerkes plei”’.42 Wycliffe himself claimed
that ‘To “pleie a pagyn of be deuyl” is to sing songs of lechery, battles and lies, to
shout like a madman, to despise God and to swear blasphemously in Christmas
celebrations.’43 In Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede, a Minorite friar claims that members
of his order never mix at “marketts & myracles”’.44 These allusions would mean nothing
if a tradition did not exist.

But the single most important evidence for the tradition comes from the Wycliffite
‘Treatise of Miracle Pleying’ that dates from about the turn of the fifteenth century.45
It is clear, first of all, that the treatise is not concerned with a dramatic genre called
Miracle Plays. Rather, the concern of the writer is literally the feigning of the miracles
of Christ in ‘bourde and pleye.’ Clifford Davidson, the most recent editor of the treatise,
had extrapolated from the criticism presented in it six arguments that were apparently
used in support of the Biblical plays:

1 Plays are presented for the service and worship of God.
2 Through these scenes, men see the consequences of sin and are converted.
3 Men and women are brought to pious tears by the sight of Christ’s Passion in dramatic
   representation; such a reaction is not in the spirit of mockery.
4 Some men can only be converted by means of entertainment - i.e. ‘by gamen and pley’.
5 Recreation is necessary for all men, and this kind of recreation is better than any other.
6 It is permitted to paint the wondrous deeds of Christ and his saints; therefore, why
   should these not be presented in plays which are more vivid than mere painting?46

Biblical plays, then, were defended against such ideological attacks as were all the other
aids to spiritual instruction.

In the course of the rather rambling prose of the Treatise, some specific references
to the content and context of the ‘feigning’ of miracles are made. In his refutation of
the idea that men can be converted by the plays, the author writes scornfully of those
who would say ‘Pley we a pley of Anticrist and of the Day of Dome that sum may be
convertid therbi’47 and he is equally scornful of the money spent at the plays claiming
that many people ‘to han wherof to spenden on thes miracles and to holde felowschipe
of glotonye and lecherie in siche dayes of miraclis pleyinge, they bisien hem beforn to
more gredily bygilen ther neghbors in byinge and in sellinge’.48 The Treatise, though
more concerned with the nuances of Lollard positions on damnation and salvation,
does, nevertheless, speak to a tradition in which the New Testament plays play an
important part. It provides evidence of regular playmaking of a kind that will come to
prominence in the next century.

But where does this leave Chaucer and his lively characters in a small town near
Oxford? Are we to assume that Absolon took part in the ‘magnus ludus’ at the priory
in Bicester in 1377 or that the village is really that of West Wittenham and Absolon
part of the troupe that went up to Exeter College? I think not, for this would confuse
fiction with reality in an unacceptable way. Oxford was not, as Professor Rowland
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asserted, a 'centre for mystery plays' at this period or any other drama, for that matter, until the late sixteenth century. But since Chaucer has given us the tale, we must assume that there was as much drama there as anywhere else. It suited him to place his tale in a world that could easily combine the youth and learning of Nicholas and the age and artisanship of the gentle but dim carpenter John.

And it is here, in the characters that make up this special and brilliant tale, that we must acknowledge the existence of a familiar tradition against which Chaucer is setting his story. Despite the fact that there is little other evidence from this period, plays such as those that can be documented fifty years later must have been regularly played in Chaucer's time. If they were not, why would a poet as subtle as Chaucer depend upon casual allusions to the stage characters of Pilate and Herod for the characterization of two of his most memorable creations? And without the plays, the Miller's Tale would lose much of its depth and allusiveness. The 'hende Nicholas' is a wonderful parodic Gabriel as he sings 'Angelus ad virginem' and Alison a blasphemous inversion of the Virgin. John the carpenter in his role as 'senex amans' is both Joseph and Noah as he prepares for the flood. To characterize Absolon as the raging but impotent Herod adds a wonderful dimension to his character.

All this we can assert as true but only if we acknowledge that by making this assertion we are identifying the Miller's Tale as an important record of early English drama. There is no hard evidence for the texts and stage conventions that he seems to be using for another quarter of a century at least. What Chaucer gives us in this tale and the custom of the Wife of Bath and Jankyn to go to see the 'pleyes of miracles' is assurance that the tradition that came to be the dominant literary form in the next century and survived in all its complexity beyond the birth of Shakespeare was fully developed by the end of the fourteenth century.

But if the tradition did exist, why is there no 'hard evidence' for it? The answer lies in the history not of drama or poetry but civic history and record keeping. It is in 1396, the year that Richard II created the city of York as a county in its own right, setting it apart from Yorkshire, that the extensive evidence for the York cycle begins. This is the year when the accounts of the newly created chamberlains begin that contain detailed financial information about all manner of entertainment. The civic memorandum book in York that provides the information from the guild and civic ordinances came into existence in 1377 enrolling some information from previous years including the first reference to the Corpus Christi Play from 1376. The pattern is similar all over the kingdom. The change of status of a community often heralds a new system of record keeping and the new documents record activities that have probably existed unrecorded for many years before. For example, when the town of Abingdon is finally released from the domination of the great Benedictine Abbey in 1548, a new set of civic accounts suddenly provides rich information about the visits of travelling players to the area. The two major periods of change in record keeping are the last decade of the fourteenth century when the first evidence of the Biblical drama becomes commonplace and the second is the period of the Edwardian reformation in the mid-sixteenth century.

Chaucer's records of early English drama remind us that it was not the tradition that did not exist but the records of that tradition. Scholars of early drama should remember this familiar witness when they seek to assess the meaning of the laconic entries in account books and guild ordinances. Chaucer scholars, on the other hand, must realize how unusual these references are and acknowledge that we have no detailed knowledge of the texts of this drama for perhaps another century.
NOTES

18 Lancashire, #381.
20 Lancashire, #423.
21 Lancashire, #1376.
22 REED: York, 2.
23 REED: York, 3.
24 Ibid.
26 REED: York, 4.
27 REED: York, 5.
28 REED: York, 6–7.
30 REED: York, 8.
31 REED: York, 10–12.
33 Wyatt, xxvi.
During a discussion of this paper at the conference, Caroline Barron of Royal Holloway and Bedford College, London, suggested that I was being over skeptical about the chronicle evidence. She also suggested that there may be reasons to explain the lack of evidence after 1411. We will both be pursuing these points.


Davidson, 1–2.

Davidson, 43.

Rowland, 'Chaucer’s Blasphemous Churl,’ 49.

REED: York, x and xxiii.

REED: York, xxix.


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