THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT USE OF THE BIBLE IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH DRAMA

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For many years I was fond of setting my students as a possible essay question: 'What did the medieval English playwrights do to the Bible?'. It had, I thought, the right blend of provocative directness and research expectation, if also some scholarly laxity. When after several years only a handful of students had attempted it, I dropped it. This paper is the beginning of my own answer to the question, and also a kind of expiation for ever having subjected anyone to it in the first place. Talking of analogues and sources is always dangerous as in the course of discussion the one can too easily slip into the other, but the particular problem with the Bible as a source of the plays is not the problem of analogues and sources but of the point at which the Bible changes from an ultimate source, which it usually is, to an immediate source. With a 'book' that was constantly quarried for Christian worship, for every kind of discussion, theological and otherwise, for all teaching and preaching, popular and learned, and was constantly being retold and constantly being taken apart and reassembled to ascertain its meaning, is it possible to know when a playwright is drawing from the text of the Bible and when from a work derived from it? There is a further question of what is meant by 'immediate' source. With a text that was in large measure in the memories of writers, it is as likely that the reference, quotation or translation comes from the memorized as from the written text, thereby providing a different context and set of associations, both actually - the book itself is after all a context - and potentially, in the mind of the writer. Though my investigation here has a more modest aim, these considerations are inevitably a background to it. By 'direct' in my title I mean primarily quotation or close translation and by 'indirect', freer translation and adaptation of the biblical text. My emphasis throughout will be on the text. By 'use' I mean the way in which the playwright has transformed the text into a dramatic form.
Inasmuch as the plays I shall be dealing with are biblical plays\(^1\) they must in some sense use the Bible, but inasmuch as they are plays they must in some way transform it. Though the Bible is full of stories it does not provide the playwright with sufficient character development or dialogue or narrative continuity or dramatic form for easy recreation as drama. The phrase 'use the Bible', however, raises an immediate problem. My own first impressions of the plays were that, apart from the odd quotation, they hardly used the Bible text at all, but rather followed traditional retellings of the Bible story – recreation at one remove rather than textual adaptation. It is clear that in a number of individual pageants and plays textual adaptation is a true description, but not usually of the Bible. Richard Beadle has shown, for example, that one York playwright made use of the Middle English metrical paraphrase of the Old Testament for recreating the stories of Moses and Pharaoh and of Abraham,\(^2\) and Frances Foster long ago drew attention to the frequent use of the text of the Northern Passion in a number of cycles and plays.\(^3\) Where one might expect to find a closer use of the Bible text is in those episodes where speech and action are more developed in the Bible itself, stories like that of Noah or the shepherds at the Nativity, but these seem rather to confirm the absence of the Bible as a prime source, since the memorable dramatic elements are developments of marital or 'professional' relationships rather than careful development of biblical detail. At the other extreme, where the Bible provides little or no detailed development of an episode – the most obvious is the Crucifixion – the playwright is forced to make use of secondary sources or to invent. \('\text{Postquam/Et autem/ibi/Ubi crucifixerunt eum}'\(^4\) provides nothing in the way of circumstantial dramatic detail. In the case of the Crucifixion the playwrights had to go beyond the Gospels but why did they alter or ignore elements of the Bible where they did exist? Is it too Lollard a view to expect them to feel

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the need at least to be guided by textual authority? It is, of course, a commonplace of medieval criticism that biblical exegesis can form a basis for expanding and altering a biblical event. The Psalms in particular, since David is so often understood as speaking in the voice of Christ at his Passion, provide material for retellings of all kinds. But in the case of Noah's wife, for example, it is not even a development sanctioned by the church's own teaching. What, indeed, did the medieval playwrights do to the Bible?

It would be unwise to allow an eccentric development, such as that of Noah's wife, or an enforced one, such as the Crucifixion, to dictate a view of the playwright's use of the Bible. As the beginning of a corrective I should like to look at a short incident which is used in all of the major English cycles or plays, as well as in the Cornish Ordinalia: the incident of the *titulus* (John 19:19; in the Wycliffite Bible, the Douai version and the Authorized version translated as 'title') which according to John is placed by Pilate on the cross above Christ's head. The Gospel accounts of the incident itself are quite straightforward. The only moderately extensive one is John's. In that the inscription is given as 'Jesus Nazarenus, rex Iudeorum'. Only in John are we told that Pilate wrote it and put it on the cross, and that many Jews read it because Calvary was near Jerusalem. Also only in John is the objection, voiced by the chief priests, and Pilate's reply: *Quod scripsi, scripsi*. Of the other versions Matthew and Luke add something, 'Hic est', to the inscription (but lose something as well). Only Luke and John contain a reference to the three languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, though Luke's version sounds more like transliterations: *litteris graecis et latinis et hebraicis* (23:38). In Matthew, Mark and Luke there is reference made simply to the inscription not to the action that surrounds it. As for the order of incidents in the Gospels within which this incident fits, there is considerable variety. Three of them mention the inscription immediately after the placing of Christ on the cross (Matthew, Mark and John). Luke places the reference slightly later. Matthew and Mark place the dividing of the garments and the reference to the inscription close together.

What all the plays have in common is the use of a version of Pilate's phrase, 'Quod scripsi, scripsi'. Their treatment of the incident as a whole, however, differs considerably, in cast, in tone, and in detail. In N. town (*Passion* II, 11.874sd–80) it is a brief, mainly enacted incident described in a stage direction. Pilate himself mimes the writing of the 'tabl' with pen and ink (only the stage direction


gives the words of the inscription: 'Hic est Ihesus Nazarenus, rex Judeorum', but possibly those amongst the audience who could read, would be able to read it. He then climbs a ladder and affixes the 'tabyl' over Christ's head. Caiaphas reads, objects (in four lines) and Pilate replies:

Dat I haue wretyn, wretyn it is
And so it xal be for me, iwys.
(ll.879–80)

The protagonists then depart for their scaffolds and Christ's cry from the cross follows: 'Heloy, heloy, Lamazabathany!' (ll.881–2). In York (XXXVI, ll.105–17) the inscription (it is simply described as 'yone writying') is already in place. Pilate, still asserting Christ's innocence, is involved in a debate with Annas and Caiaphas. Annas suddenly (apparently) sees the inscription (its content is only hinted at in Annas's words, ll.109–13) and objects to it. Pilate replies:

Quod scripsi, scripsi
3one same wrotte I;
I bide herby.
What [whatsoever] gedlyng will grucche thereagayne.
(ll.114–17)

The action then shifts to Christ's complaint to mankind. In Chester (XVIa, ll.216sd–40), Pilate holding the 'table' in his hand ('habens tabulam in manu') summons the Second Jew, one of the soldiers/torturers, to nail it above Christ's head as a 'cognisens', since he 'sayd' he was 'kynge of Jewes'. The soldier objects, suggesting Pilate should say how Christ lied by claiming to be 'kynge of Jewes'. Pilate replies:

That that ys wrytten, I have wrytten.
(ll.233)

The Third Jew responds to his words:

And in good fayth that ys fowle wrytten.
(ll.234)

After his eight-line speech of further complaint, Mary enters weeping and begins a planctus. The most developed version is that in Towneley (XXIII, ll.516–62). Christ is on the cross, as in all the other versions, but here the torturers are dividing Christ's garments (in John this happens immediately after, vv.23 and 24, but in

It is worth observing that it is at line 880 that the Passion Play text gives way to earlier pageant material. Thus Christ's cry cannot with certainty be said to follow immediately after Pilate's words. See Passion Play, 8–9 and Peter Meredith, 'Manuscript, scribe and performance: further looks at the N. town manuscript', in Regionalism in late medieval manuscripts and texts, ed. Felicity Riddy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), 122–4.
Matthew, Mark and Luke it happens earlier). The Fourth Torturer wins and the Second draws their attention to the inscription which has appeared without their noticing. It is presumably placed above Christ's head while they are drawing lots but there is no stage direction to say when or who did it (not a problem for an audience, though it is for a modern reader or director). They immediately assume that Pilate has put it there and decide to go and see what it means. The First can clearly make nothing of it, the Second recognizes that it is in Greek, Hebrew and Latin (John 19:20; Luke 23:38), the Third agrees and the Fourth, claiming clerkly knowledge, reads it.

The objection becomes a momentary dialogue before they agree to go to Pilate to complain. The Third makes their objection and Pilate replies:

Boys, I say, what mell ye you? 
As it is writen shall it be now; 
I say certane; 
Quod scriptum scripsi, 
That same wrote I, 
What gadling gruches ther agane? 
(11.552-7)

The Fourth Torturer assumes that as Pilate is a lawyer he must know what he is doing, and the First says that it won't help Christ anyway. The torturers return to Christ and the mocking continues. In the midst of it comes Christ's cry from the cross: 'hely, hely lamazabatany!' (1.578).

What do these play versions add up to in terms of dramatic development of biblical detail? N.town's use is brief but it does transform the incident into a distinctive dramatic form. The silent writing of the inscription, the defiant personal nailing of it to the cross, the strange visual effect of Pilate climbing a ladder resting against the cross on which Christ himself is hanging, only a few moments before the dreadful cry of 'Heloy, heloy lamazabathany!', while Caiaphas presses forward to read what he has written. It is also worth noting that Pilate's actions are made to grow out of Annas's immediately preceding mockery of Christ: 'yf }DU kyng of Israel be' (1.871). Hence the defiance, which is reiterated in Pilate's refusal to change the inscription. It is a striking, slightly bizarre yet humanly moving moment, using the expanded text of the biblical titulus (but visually only), the objection by the chief priests, and Pilate's reply in translation as brief realizations of John's text, altering almost nothing. I say 'almost' because the one change is in Pilate's words: the second scripsi has become 'wretyn it is'. I will
return to this with Towneley's adaptation. York's treatment of the incident, by contrast, is almost throwaway, though similar emotions are at work. There is an element of the comic in Annas's and Caiaphas's abuse being suddenly undermined as they register the inscription. Pilate's assertion of his own point of view, in exactly the words of John's Gospel, is instantly lost in Christ's speech of rebuke to man. One could say that the brief incident has been reduced to something even briefer, a mere element in a dialogue. Chester though longer is further from the Gospel versions. As in Towneley, the cast is Pilate and the torturers (perhaps the 'they' of Matthew 27:37, 'imposuerunt'); Pilate seems to go half way to meet the objection, yet unmade, by making it clear that he is putting down what Christ said; the titulus has become a tabula described by Pilate as a 'cognisens', a royal (in this case) emblem or badge; and his words have become confused. 'That that ys wrytten, I have wrytten' personalizes and destabilizes the inviolability of the written words. The Third Jew's continuation of the protest further reduces it to petty bickering.

Towneley makes the most of expanding the Gospel account by developing the detail. The audience would presumably see the placing of the titulus, perhaps in the manner of N.town, but no stage direction comments on it. Like Chester, the Towneley version involves only Pilate and the four torturers, but unlike all the other versions it includes and develops the three languages. They are developed humanly, via the characteristics (I hesitate to use the word 'characters') of the four torturers. The inscription incident itself grows out of the preceding drawing of lots through the natural inclination of those who have lost to find something else to think about. The Fourth wins. The First not content with losing begins to bargain with him for the garment, but the Second clearly gives up and turns away, sees the inscription and draws the others' attention to it. Understandably, given the preoccupation of the First and Fourth Torturers, only the Third responds. His remark that only Pilate could have put it there, draws the other two into the action. The dialogue then runs in the accustomed numerical manner as each in turn comments on the inscription in his own way: total bewilderment from the First, an acknowledgement of the existence of the three languages from the Second, agreement about the difficulty of explaining it from the Third, cocky boasting from the Fourth (the winner of Christ's seamless garment), fulfilled by a reading of the inscription. The objection to what is written is shared between the First, who knows it is wrong, and the Second, who shows what is wrong. They go to Pilate (there is a sense of movement about a space here) and the Third voices their objection more fully. After Pilate's refusal to alter it, the Fourth, justifying their acceptance of this rebuff, points out that as a 'man of law' Pilate (a) will have his own way, and (b) must have a reason for
what he’s done, and the First, similarly motivated, rounds it off (bringing us back to the beginning of the numerical sequence) with saying that ‘Noght that he can write’ can save Christ from death.

It will be clear from this summary that the development in Towneley lies in a coherent humanizing of the bare incidents of the Gospels. It is not elaborate literary development, there is no imagery, for example, but there is a variety and naturalness of language. The inscription is a ‘skraw’, a ‘boke’, and a ‘tabyl’; the Fourth Torturer claims to be the ‘best latyn wright’; the First speaks in a bemused rhetoric:

A[Ever] the more I loke theron
A[Ever] the more I thynke I fon.
(ll.525–6)

Pilate is matey and domineering. There is no ‘ghostly’ development. The languages are simply three languages. There is no attempt to give them the kind of significance that Augustine or Isidore gives them. Their meaning depends on the individual minds of the audience. Equally with the inscription there is no attempt to explain how Christ is King of the Jews in a spiritual rather than a historical sense:

Rex ergo Judaeorum Christus, sed Judaeorum circumcisione cordis, spiritu, non littera.9

The only possible significant change in this direction, and it exists in N.town and Chester as well as Towneley, is the change in Pilate’s remark from scripsi to scriptum or ‘it is written’. This is particularly noticeable in Towneley because at this point Towneley is adapting York and has altered York’s straight quotation from John.10 What the commentators emphasize is the truth and the inviolability of Pilate’s statement not Pilate’s own individual intention. Christ is king of the Jews, and so apparently scriptum est, it is written. The phrase is frequently used in the Bible for what has been recorded (often in the law of Moses) or established by prophecy. The words carry a binding sense of truth with them. Augustine relates Pilate’s inscription to the titulus of Psalms 55–9 (Psalms of the Passion) ‘in tituli inscriptionem’ and particularly to Psalms 56 and 58 where the ‘title’ is somehow under threat (‘ne disperdas/corrumpas . . . in tituli inscriptionem’), which Augustine sees as the Jews’ objection to

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8 Isidore, Etymologiarum sive Originum, ed. W.M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), IX, i, 3; Augustine, Patrologia Latina 35, col. 1946
9 Bede, Patrologia Latina 92, col. 911.
10 The clearest indication of a relationship between the two is the line, ‘What gedling will grucche/ gruches thereagayne’ appearing with minor variations in both texts, York, 1.117 and Towneley, 1.557.
Pilate's remark. It is a small point but it is one which carries some weight of biblical commentary behind it. None of the plays follow the apocryphal development of the *titulus* as the *Northern Passion* does or refer to the Holy Rood legend where the wood of the title becomes one of the four woods of the cross and as palm or olive signifies peace.

The treatment of this incident shows the problems and the possibilities of the text of the Bible. Less extreme than in the case of the Crucifixion, there is, nevertheless, little text that lends itself to immediate reuse as drama. What there is, the *titulus* and Pilate's retort, is quoted or translated more or less precisely as it is in the Gospel. By quoting, the playwright can touch on the authority of the Bible text as well as possibly open up the interpretations of the commentators, or, as easily, quotation can simply become a macaronic element in the dialogue, as I have already suggested it does in York. Towneley does something similar to a work like *Meditationes*, filling in the gaps in the story left by the Gospel, but humorously in relation to minor characters, and without the weight of emotive contemplation. N.town is almost as brief as York but quite different in creating a wholly theatrical incident. Translation can play down as easily as highlight the existence of the biblical text. N.town's translation by its shape and position (rounding off the incident) draws attention to its authority; Chester's, very little different in form, personalizes and conceals the authority. Towneley draws attention to the biblical text by centralizing the semi-quotation within semi-translation:

As it is written shall it be.../Quod scriptum scripsi/ That same wrote I.

These seem to me to represent largely run-of-the-mill approaches to a suggestive but sparse biblical passage, but what happens when the Bible text is more extensive?

Where the Bible provides a continuous section of direct speech the playing-down of the authoritative text frequently happens through the very transformation into simple English. An obvious

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11 Augustine, *Patrologia Latina* 36, coll. 663, 692–3. The *Biblia Sacra* and the Gutenberg Bible have 'disperdas', Augustine, 'corrumpas'.


place is Christ's discourses after the Last Supper. In Towneley XX, lines 386–493 are almost continuous translation/paraphrase of the discourses, harmonized, but in sections. Lines 386–415 are John 13:5–16; lines 416–31 are Matthew 26:31–5; lines 432–93 are (with gaps) John 14:1–31. One example must suffice, lines 386–95 (both texts are given here continuously; the Gospel text is given in square brackets where it matches only the speaker):

_Petrus:_

6. [Venit ergo ad Simonem Petrum: et dicit ei Petrus]

lord, shuld thou wesh feytt myne?
thou art my lord, and I thy hyne.

_Ihesus:_

why I do it thou wote not yit,
peter, herafter shall thou wytt.

_Petrus:_

Nay, master, I the heytt,
thou shall neuer wesh my feytt.

_Ihesus:_

Bot I the wesh, thou mon mys
parte with me in heuens blys.

_Petrus:_

Nay, lord, or I that forgo,
wesh heede, handys, and feytt also.

Domine, tu mihi lavas pedes?

7. [Respondit Iesus, et dixit ei:]

Quod ego facio, tu nescis modo
scies autem postea.

8. [Dicit ei Petrus:]

Non lavabis mihi pedes in aeternum
[Respondit ei Iesus:]

Si non lavero te, non
habebis partem mecum.

9. [Dicit ei Simon Petrus:]

Domine, non tantum
pedes meos, sed et manus et caput.

The rest of the section is similar, sometimes closer, sometimes less so. The translation often moves into paraphrase, or adds explanation or adapts as necessary for verse, but it is recognizably the biblical text and in the order of the Gospel. The same is true of Chester XV, where lines 169–250 parallel John 13:33–8 and 14:1–18, again in the order of the Gospel. York XXVII does something similar only more sporadically and briefly (ll.116–87). Is the biblical text used here because it is easy to transform, being already dialogue? Or because of its importance as the words of Christ? Its effect in both Chester and Towneley is to some extent to raise the interest of the verse by providing a more complex train of thought, by adding variety of ideas, and, a complement to these, by cutting down to some extent the amount of formulaic commonplace. Was the playwright seizing the opportunity to do just this? It argues considerable familiarity with these stretches of the Gospels, textual or memorized. Or was the playwright giving authority to his pageant by using the actual words of Christ? If so, why is there no quotation to draw attention to the biblical origin of the text?

Even more striking as biblical translation is the brief section of the _Mary Play_, lines 1251–8, which parallels Luke 1:26–8. Here narrative is turned into speech but with surprising fidelity to the original; so much so that I remain convinced that in one case the interpretation of the English can be determined by the Latin. The first line of God's speech is:
which has usually been assumed to be:

From us, god, aungel Gabryel, þu xalt be sende

but in view of 'missus est angelus Gabriel a Deo', seems to me likely to be:

From us, God aungel Gabryel, þu xalt be sende . . .

despite the apparent awkwardness for delivery – and in this case it is only apparent.\(^{14}\) The question again arises, why? Here, where the translation is so close, one might reasonably expect some specific purpose. It is the turning-point of the play; is the playwright marking this by going directly to the Gospel text, and expecting his audience to recognize the fact and respond to the Gospel text just below the surface of the play? Does the slight awkwardness of the adaptation to verse deliberately draw attention to the passage as translation in the way that Rolle’s Psalter translations do, laying stress on the significance of the individual word?\(^{15}\) The same technique appears in the conversation between Mary and Gabriel at lines 1300–22. All in all almost the whole text of Luke 1:26–38 (the Annunciation narrative) is closely translated. Between the close translation occurs expansion, explanation and celebration. Clearly though the turning-point in the play is God’s decision to save mankind expressed in his sending of Gabriel, the play is actually a celebration and explanation of the Ave Maria, and it is therefore not surprising that parts of the Gospel translations are, as it were, flourished with intellectual and emotional decoration. The messages given by the Son and the Holy Spirit, immediately after God’s sending of Gabriel, are references in one way or another to what Gabriel will later say. The Son’s ‘Say þat she is withowte wo and ful of grace’ is linguistic play on as well as translation of the first line of Gabriel’s greeting, Ave gracia plena; the Holy Spirit’s words are largely foreshadowings of Gabriel’s news about Elizabeth. In both cases, however, something is added which heightens the emotional

\(^{14}\) Stephen Spector is dubious and reads ‘god aungel Gabryel’, _N-Town Play, _I, 118. See also II, 457, note to Pageant 11, 1189.

atmosphere: the eagerness of the Son to be made man by Mary, the joy foretold by the Holy Spirit that Mary herself will feel (see ll.1368–9).

When Gabriel greets Mary he greets her in Latin with the words of the Gospel, not of the familiar liturgical prayer. The *Ave* is then translated (ll.1280–1) and each of the words or phrases from it is treated to an involved, rhetorical and explanatory elaboration. Word picks up word (‘sorwe . . . sorwe, grace . . . grace, kepyng . . . kepe’), and idea leads to idea, creating a kind of celebratory set of variations on the words of the text. The sin of *Eva* is reversed in the angelic greeting of promised salvation, *Ave*, which in turn means that Mary is ‘withowte sorwe’, *a ve* (compare the Son’s ‘withowte wo’ l.1259). Absence of sorrow is not enough for Mary and increase of joy is provided by her abundant grace, *gratia plena*, but those who are in grace need protection, hence *Dominus tecum*, whose endless protection means that Mary is especially blessed, *benedicta tu in mulieribus*. The play on the words of the *Ave* is followed again by close translation of the Gospel (Luke 1:35–7) and further explanation, commenting on Mary’s hesitation – a frequent point of discussion for the commentators. When Gabriel speaks again it is close translation of Luke 1:30–3. Mary voices (Luke 1:34) and explains her doubts and again Gabriel answers in the words of the Gospel (Luke 1:35–7).

As might be expected all the other plays to some extent use this dialogue, but all in slightly differing ways. Little attempt is made at close continuous translation but the order of the dialogue is always that of the Gospel. Because of its liturgical use, all use ‘Mary’ in the initial greeting (York XII, l.145. Towneley X, l.83, Chester VI, l.1), and Chester moves even closer to the liturgical form since it includes translation of *et benedictus fructus ventris tui*, which biblically is spoken by Elizabeth (Luke 1:42). York does not include Gabriel’s final line ‘quia non erit impossibile apud Deum omne verbum’. Both York and Towneley submerge the biblical text in the language of the play so that only occasionally do biblical phrases rise above the surface. Seldom is there an attempt in any to echo the words of the Latin. Where the *Mary Play* translates *Spiritus Sancti superveniet in te* as ‘The Holy Gost xal come fro above to the’, making use of the elements of the Latin word ‘*superveniet*’, all the others use the conventional phrase ‘shall light in the (T.126)/in he sall lighte (Y.177)/ shall in thee light (Ch. 27)’, though the *Mary Play’s* ‘schadu he’ for ‘*obumbrabit*’ is matched by Chester’s ‘shadowe thee’ (29) and Towneley’s ‘vmshade’ (128).

In all the cycle plays and in the *Mary Play* (as in Luke) the Annunciation is followed by the Visit to Elizabeth, either in the same pageant (York and Chester) or, after the Joseph’s trouble episode from Matthew’s Gospel, in the next (Towneley XI). and all make use of the conversation between Elizabeth and Mary and the
text of the Magnificat. Once again the way in which these are used differs. In York and Chester it is as though Mary turns from Gabriel to address Elizabeth. There is no use of Luke’s narrative spacing (v. 39), no sense of distance of place or time between the two events. Only the Mary Play dramatizes the journey and creates a sense of a time gap. Towneley, starting a new pageant and therefore not facing a problem of continuity, begins with a very chatty conversation between the two women which bears no relation to the Gospel account. Enquiries about how everyone is at home give so strong a sense of an ordinary everyday event that there is a considerable jarring in the abrupt transition to the biblical version of the meeting at line 31. Towneley also misrepresents, or at least obscures, the meaning of: Ecce enim ut facta est vox salutationis tuae in auribus meis:

ffor syn that tyme full well I wote,
The steyvn of angell voce it smote,
And rang now in myn ere;
(l.37-9)

It seems as though the writer has mistaken salutationis tuae for the angelic salutation of Mary by Gabriel and created the stanza to fit that meaning. Is mistranslation of this kind a sign of working from the Latin original, however misguidedly? As with the Annunciation, the Mary Play translates relatively closely:

Fulfylled with þe Holy Gost, þus lowde I cry (l.1468)  
et repleta est Spiritu Sancto Elizabeth et exclamavit voce magna et dixit  
Blyssyd be þu amonge all women (l.1469)  
Benedicta tu inter mulieres  
And blyssyd be þe frute of þi wombe also . . . (l.1470)  
et benedictus fructus ventris tui  
How is it þat þe modyr of God me xulde come to . . . (l.1472)  
Et unde hoc mihi ut veniat mater Domini mei ad me.

In the cycle pageants the treatment of this section of the Gospel is less careful. The ideas are more or less there, at times the words are, and in their Gospel order, but there is no strong sense of their being so close to the surface as to be suddenly and excitingly recognizable to anyone in the audience. The Magnificat is different again. In a way it is slightly outside the realm of biblical translation since it is almost certainly seen as a liturgical piece. It is sung in Latin at York after translation of the opening two lines. In Chester the situation is slightly less clear. The whole is translated but there is a suggestion that the whole is also sung. It is clearly being seen as liturgical since it includes the doxology at the end, ‘Joy to the Father evermore’ etc. (l.107–12). Towneley, on the other hand, keeps quite close to the original and there is no sign of singing and no doxology. The Mary Play, as with the Gradual Psalms, is clearly presenting the
Magnificat as liturgical\textsuperscript{16} (it contains the doxology), but with an interposed translation, often a very awkward one. It is the only play to treat the Canticle in this way, showing a concern for the matching of text and translation and often using a translation by word rather than by sense, thus giving precedence to the Latin. It does not use the liturgical Magnificat as York and perhaps Chester do as part incidental music, part liturgical recollection, using the music to enhance the enjoyment and to exploit the liturgical associations; it is, instead, a combination of liturgical recollection and explanation. The aesthetic experience to some extent gives way to the pedagogic. This is quite a different treatment from that of the Ave gratia plena, and different again from the superficially similar Gradual Psalms (Mary Play, l.355-444), because there the speaking of the text and commentary is accompanied by the visual and emotional experience of the small child climbing the steps, crossing the border between her parental home and her spiritual home, that of God, her other father (l.319-22).

What kinds of comment might one make on these differences of treatment? In many ways the cycle-play versions are straightforward retellings. At York, however, the biblical incident is set against an extended preceding exposition of the prophecies of the coming of Christ which acts as celebratory as well as explanatory comment of the coming Annunciation (XII, l.1-144). But the Annunciation itself and the Visit are handled very simply, moving very little outside the Gospel account and doing very little with it beyond paraphrase – perhaps a very successful climax, perhaps overwhelmed by the preliminaries. Chester also moves little beyond Gospel paraphrase and is even simpler, and itself acts as a brief preface to the troubles of Joseph and the major episodes, Octavian and the Sibyl and the birth of Christ. Towneley’s version of the Annunciation is dominated initially by God’s figural introduction emphasizing the pivotal position of the Annunciation (X, l.1-52), and latterly by Joseph’s very human trouble. Towneley’s Visit is taken up almost entirely by the Magnificat and the family chat of Mary and Elizabeth. All in varying degrees use the idea of family relationships – one of the common fifteenth-century centres of interest.\textsuperscript{17} Hans-Jürgen Diller has suggested in a recent article that rather than ‘intangible’ doctrinal matters of belief the plays are primarily concerned with putting across ‘tangible’ elements that can

\textsuperscript{16} Mary herself comments on the liturgical use:
\begin{verbatim}
Evyr to be songe and also to be seyn,
Every day amongst us at our evesong. (l.1541-1)
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{17} See, for example, the genealogical note prefixed to the Mary Play (87, note to 1.25), the stained glass in the east window of Holy Trinity, Goodramgate, York, the southern panels of the screen in St Helen, Ranworth, Norfolk, and G. McN. Rushforth, Medieval Christian imagery (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 198-204.
be presented and felt emotionally or 'bodily'. This is largely, but not entirely, borne out here. He singles out N.town, parts of the Mary and Passion Plays in particular, as an exception. Up to a point I would agree. But to shift the angle of his argument slightly I would suggest that one of the things that the Mary Play writer is doing in the Annunciation episode is turning the 'intangible' into the 'tangible', making the doctrinal emotionally available, exciting the understanding – certainly in the case of the biblical text. This is not simply an explanation of what the Annunciation was in human terms. By first of all telling the human story of Mary’s parents and her own early life, and then by setting it in the context of fallen man, the play expands understanding of the words of the central moment, the angelic greeting. The meaning of the Ave is extended by what has preceded it; on the human side, for example, by the loving-kindness of Mary’s parents, her own goodness and outspokenness, her experience of the other world through the spiritual experience of the temple, and on the other side, the world of humankind, by the significance of this moment for the whole future of the world. Then, at the moment when the greeting is spoken, it is also celebrated: the biblical words become charged not only with the human story but with an intellectual and emotional life of their own. This concentration on the exceptional, the transcendental text, the Ave, is buttressed by a concern with the actuality of the text which surrounds it, the words of the Gospel. Hence the closeness of the translations. The treatment of the Annunciation in the Mary Play is a far more complex response to the Gospel text than that of any of the cycle pageants.

For a study of this kind, detailed investigation of the use of the Bible text in a variety of episodes in all the cycle plays and in the Mary and Passion Plays seems to me to be the only way of approach, but it is laboured and it produces a fragmented result. Is it possible to make any general observations, given that these are somewhat random samplings? Plays are basically spectacle, dialogue and action. If they wanted to use the Bible text, writers could create scenes from biblical descriptions, could make their characters do what the Bible says where there is an action described, or say it where there is direct speech, or they could use the Bible text to create dialogue out of reported speech or description. They could also make use of the exegetical habit of seeing one part of the Bible as figuring another and transfer sections of text from one place to another. It will be clear from what has been said already that all these things happened. There were playwrights who were interested in following the events

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of the Bible in detail, in basing dialogue on reported speech and description, and in letting Christ speak in his own words. Was this because they were interested in authenticity, truth to the word? Or authority, the power of the word? Or were they simply taking the easiest way out in providing a pageant or a play by using what was most readily available? Authenticity is a difficult concept. Authentic what? Would the members of the audience hearing the words of the Bible, or close translations of them, recognize them and respond to them as authentically sacred? No doubt the answer is: some would, some wouldn't. Would that necessarily matter to the writers whose concern might be satisfaction of their own sense of authenticity? In the case of the *Ave* in the *Mary Play* both writer and audience are surely involved in the celebrating of the 'authenticity' of the words. Or might the intention be not authentic sacredness but authentic character? *Quod scripsi, scripsi* establishes Pilate's character, perhaps, in a way that no other words can do. Or is it authenticity simply in the sense that these are the real words of character or situation? Authority seems to me even more difficult. Latin itself is often said to convey authority. But what sort of authority? The power of the sacred language? *Vere filius dei erat iste* can powerfully convey affirmation of Christ's divinity, but it is not so much that they are the words of the Gospel that gives them authority as that they have been used and reused in literature and art over the centuries as an expression of faith at what has the appearance of being the moment of defeat. In all the plays it also helps create a sympathetic character for the Centurion. Does this interfere with the expression of biblical authority? Can the words of the Gospel, in other words, act in isolation as they are made to do in biblical exegesis? It is also worth noting that only the N.town Passion quotes the Latin and therefore carries the whole weight of the authority of the text and makes the isolation of the quotation more possible.

Related to the question of authority is the matter of using the Bible because it was a convenient quarry. In the fifteenth century after the promulgation of the Constitutions of Archbishop Arundel in 1409 this was no longer a simple matter. As a reaction to the


Lollard threat, Arundel outlawed biblical translation except when sanctioned by an ecclesiastical authority. This was clearly taken to mean not just extensive translations but translation of short excerpts as well since the translator of the *Myroure of oure Ladye* considered it necessary to obtain permission for his brief translations, and it appears also to have included retellings, if that is the reason for Nicholas Love seeking approval in 1410 for his English translation of the *Meditations* – in this case from Arundel himself.\(^{21}\) Would the plays have been considered *liber*, *libellus* or *tractatus*, the terms used in the Constitutions? I know of no evidence for the investigation of play translations by any ecclesiastical authority. The Chester plays are given the seal of authority by the bishop of Chester (forty days of pardon) but this must be late (and suspect) since there was no bishop until 1541.\(^{22}\) There are also the comments of the Franciscan friar, William Melton, on the York Play in 1426. Though there is no indication that he was giving any kind of official approval, it was perhaps important for the city to have the opinion of a noted preacher – even if only in passing. The scope of the York Play is first made clear in 1415 and pageants were certainly revised piecemeal at various times after that, so there is no doubt that translation occurred within the period named in the Constitutions.\(^{23}\) Two kinds of authority are at work here: the authority of the word which is too complex to be put into the hands or minds of ordinary people, and the authority of the word which was the guiding principle of human behaviour and hence had to be available to all. Interestingly the plays lie somewhere between the two. They are certainly not part of a subversive Lollard activity, but they are making available to ordinary people in simple English many of the words of the Bible.

This paper has concentrated on a certain way the Bible is used in the plays, one which, because it appears simple and straightforward, or even at times invisible, has been largely relegated to biblical references in the notes of editions. It seems to me important to begin to establish just how much the play text in certain pageants and plays is dependent on the biblical text, and the kind of use that is made of it. It needs a far broader study than this one to put it in the context of the other uses of the Bible, and fully


\(^{23}\) For William Melton, see *Records of Early English Drama York*, eds Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, 2 vols (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 43-4, and for the first lists of pageants, ibid., 16-26.
in the context of how it is used dramatically. I have not dealt with Latin quotation from the Bible in the detailed way it deserves nor have I looked at the effects of exegesis or the liturgy on the text. There are also still many puzzles. Why is there so much development of the shepherds' pageants and such a limited treatment of the ministry of Christ? Why do some writers ignore biblical texts almost completely (as in the Towneley *John the Baptist*) which others follow closely? As I suggested at the beginning, what the medieval English playwrights did to the Bible is more than a student-sized project.