

The English Mystery Tradition and Originality in John Bale's Trilogy

by
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Throughout the sixteenth as well as in the fifteenth century, a number of the mystery cycles still continued to be played at various sites in England (for example, in Preston, York, Lancaster, Chester, Coventry, Lincoln, Norwich, and Chelmsford), and some of them even survived into the seventeenth century. John Bale (1495–1563) could easily have seen such plays in Norwich, where he entered the convent of the Camelite House at 12 years of age. In those days there was such a density of dramatic activity throughout East Anglia that it is no wonder that the influence of the mystery cycles was still felt so intensely by this revolutionary writer.

Bale started his dramatic career by rewriting medieval subjects or adapting their forms to his use. Of his dramatic work, there survive, apart from *King Johan*, three so-called "mystery plays" and a Biblical morality (*Thre Lawes*), and among the works listed in his Catalogue in 1536, nine plays which have not survived are devoted to scriptural themes. His trilogy (his first three plays: *The Chefe Promyses of God*, *Johan Baptystes Preachynge*, and *The Temptacyon of our Lorde*),¹ all assigned to 1538, contain a strange mixture of mystery play and morality traditions, and his trilogy itself was intended to constitute a mystery cycle.

Though acknowledging himself to be a rebel, Bale was conservative in the first phase of his dramatic writing. He knew the effectiveness of the mystery cycle as a tradition, took advantage of the audience's familiarity with these Biblical stories and their potential polemical power to express his own personal religious beliefs. In other words, he used the theatricality of a Catholic form as a vehicle for his Protestant vision.

The aim of this brief paper is first to show the hereditary aspects of the mystery cycles in Bale's trilogy and then to discuss his important advance from them. For convenience, we will be focusing on *John Baptist*,² the second of his trilogy because, despite its shortness, this play presents the most characteristic features of his trilogy.

That these three plays constitute part of an uncompleted cycle of Christ seems to

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be a reasonable supposition. According to Bale's second *Summarium*, a catalogue of English Writers drawn up by himself in 1548, he had written 8 plays on the life of Christ.³ Peter Happé suggests that Bale must have reworked some material from the life of Christ into these three extant plays.⁴ They were listed together by the author himself and performed together at the Market Cross at Kilkenny on the day of Mary Tudor's coronation.⁵ They are closely related both in subject and structure and seem to be the beginning of a full cycle of Christ he wrote or intended to write. This is only external evidence surmised from the *Summarium*, but more convincing internal evidences can be sought out in their sequence.

The links between *God's Promises*, *John Baptist*, and *The Temptation* suggest how carefully constructed and neatly integrated the whole cycle would have been. First, these plays are arranged chronologically. *God's Promises* bridges the Old and New Testaments, *John Baptist* parallels *Matthew* 4 and its counterparts in the other Gospels (*Mark* 1: 1–11; *Luke* 3: 1–18, *John* 1: 19–34), and *The Temptation of our Lord* parallels *Matthew* 4: 1–11. Moreover, these plays are written consecutively. The first play tells us that the law and the prophets are but dark "Fygure and shaddowe" (*GP* 929–30) of what is to come. It foretells the baptism of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Ghost, which we will see in the next play. The second *John Baptist* begins by reminding us of the previous play, mentioning the Law and prophets as the "shaddowes and fygures" (*JB* 9) of the old covenant. John begins his preaching just where he left off previously. Christ receives baptism, fulfilling the prophecies of the first play, and the Holy Ghost signified by the dove descends on Him (*GP* 897–902; *TOL* 1–2). Another significant echo from the first to the second play is the reference to John as a messenger of God: in the first, ". . . my [God's] massenger shalt thou be" (*GP* 858), and in the second, "As a massenger I come" (*JB* 36). *The Temptation*⁶ begins by Bale's own speech that "After hys baptyme Christ was Gods sonne declared/By the fathers voyce as ye before have hearde" (*TOL* 1–2), which closely relates to the speech by Pater Coelestis in *God's Promises* that "And thys my sonne was with me one God essencyall. . . /And a God he is of equall dignyte" (*GP* 40&42). Then *The Temptation* also recalls the descending of the dove, and Christ reminds the audience that Moses' forty years in the wilderness prefigured Christ's forty days of fasting. Satan in the play has also heard of the recent events: John's preaching, the descent of the dove (the Holy Ghost) and the voice from heaven (66), and after the temptations are concluded, the angels praise Jesus for His victory, which was intended from the creation of the world.

John Baptist has many references to the Gospels in common with the corresponding mystery plays: the N-Town 22 (*The Baptism*),⁷ Towneley 19 (*Iohannes Baptista*)⁷ and York 21 (*The Baptism*).⁷ They are close to one another in their heavy dependence upon the Gospel narratives, and use the same sources. Common points include the descending of the Holy Ghost (*JB* 43, 326; *NT* 93 sd; *T* 43–44; *Y* 67–68), the Father's

proclamation of the Son that "Thys is myne owne sone and only hartes delyght/My treasure, my joye, beloved most inteyrlye" (*JB* 432–33; *NT* 93–94), and the lengthy exposition on the differences between baptism by Jesus in the Holy Ghost and fire and that by John in water. (*JB* 189–206, 326; *NT* 27–35; *T* 48; *Y* 8–14).

John Baptist corresponds to the N-Town and Towneley in foretelling Jesus' suffering of the Passion as amending man's sin (*JB* 13, 21, 344; *NT* 47–49; *T* 33–40). Bale's John calls Jesus "the lambe of innocencye" (*JB* 375), while the N-Town calls Him "Agnus Dei" (*NT* 40–41). Before baptizing Jesus, Bale's John, as in the N-Town and Towneley, says he is unworthy to loose His shoe latches (*Luke* 3: 16), and is reluctant to do so, saying "I, a carnall synner, ought to have baptyme of the" (385), while the N-Town John says, "I xulde rather of the haue sougth/Holy baptyme þan þu of me," (*NT* 69–70) or the York John "for lorde, methynketh it wer more nede/þou baptised me" (*Y* 111–12). Bale's play, like the York play (155–58), emphasizes that this baptism of Jesus is for man's profit, to destroy Satan's power. The N-Town John describes Christ's submission to baptism as an act of meekness and humility and mentions it a couple of times (*NT* 67, 81, 86, 97, 150–51), an idea which Bale's John shares (30–31, 77, 464). However, here comes the end of the similarities to the mystery cycles. When these similarities are closely examined, just as many differences of treatment crop up and the differences are inseparably connected with the author's new doctrines.

Christ's submission to baptism, for example, is considered as the virtue of humility in the mystery plays, and the significance of imitating His meekness and holiness is stated. Particularly, the N-Town treatment is full of simple devotional feeling, awe, and reverence, quite befitting to the theme.

In contrast, Bale's treatment presents an entirely different mood and intention. It is much more dry, brief, blunt and as a result less undramatic. Here, Christ's submission is allegorically interpreted as the acceptance of the Reformation (397–408, 410–14, 419–21) which Bale strongly supports.

Such difference of treatment and tone is even more conspicuous in John's fearful reluctance to baptize Jesus. This theme itself is, of course, of a Biblical origin (but it appears only in *Matthew* 3:14) and is adopted into the mystery plays as a dramatic feature. John in the York, for example, humbly refuses to baptize Jesus by his hand, using the rhetoric of paradox, such as "How schulde I þan, þat is a thrall,/Giffe þe baptyme, þat rightwis is/And has been euere?" (115–17), or "What riche man gose from dore to dore/To begge at hym þat has right noght?" (120–21), because baptism is to cleanse man of sin, but here is no sin and Jesus is not in need of it (*Y* 77–83). Such a baptism is so repellent to John's natural feeling. He even shakes with fear to touch Jesus. It is only after further insistence from both Jesus and the Angels that John accepts to baptize Him. The description here is very touching and full of devotion, and gives this impersonal figure a human dimension.

Bale, like the York dramatist, saw the dramatic possibilities of amplifying the motif. He too gives a lengthy speech of his unwillingness to obey the divine command. Bale's John trembles and shrinks back from the mission, saying, "Requyre not of me, I desyre the, instauntlye/To presume so farre; for doubtlesse I am unworthye" (383–84). He differentiates two kinds of baptism by Jesus and by himself. However, here ends the timidity of the medieval figure, and there follows the brief imperative "Then blessed saver, thy servaunt here sanctyfye!" (418) and John baptizes Jesus, saying "I baptyse the, Lorde, by soch autoryte/As thy grace hath geven to my poore symplenesse . . ." (422–23) It is in the polemical discussion on the Baptism that Bale is more interested, and not in John's natural feeling of fear, awe, or devotion, which is typical of the mystery plays, so that the mood of the play is less emotional and devotional.

This delicate shift of focus on John Baptist strongly suggests the author's new treatment of the theme. In other words, Bale's John is emphasized as preacher rather than as prophet. Bale's play marks a new departure from the mystery plays in emphasizing the exposition of Protestant doctrines and controversial applications. I should like to examine the differences in more detail.

All the Baptism plays in the mystery cycles concentrate almost exclusively on the Baptism itself as rite, its sacramental significance (*NT* 63–64; *T* 193–200; *Y* 99–105), and ceremonial forms of worship (*T* 185–92), whereas Bale is at least equally interested in John's conversions and controversies. Thus, Bale's John gives prominence to John's centrality as a preacher, as the person who fearlessly delivers ethical and religious judgements.

For comparison, here is a quotation from the York play in which Jesus reveals two reasons for His being baptized by John.

And sithen myselffe haue taken mankynde,
 For men schall me þer myrroure make
 And haue my doying in ther mynde,
 Also I do þe baptyme take.
 I will forthy
 Myselfe be baptiste for ther sake
 Full oppynly.

Anodir skill I schall þe tell:
 My will is þis, þat fro þis day
 þe vertue of my baptyme dwelle
 In baptyme-watir euere and ay,
 Mankynde to taste,
 Thurgh my grace þerto to take alway

þe haly gaste.

(York XXI, *The Baptism*, 92–105)

The York Jesus explains that he is baptized in order to sanctify baptismal water forever after and to be a mirror (93), an example to man of what he must do. John responds with a remark that he will devote the rest of his life to preaching this grace to the public (*Y* 155, 169, 171, 273). What is typical here of the York as well as of the other mystery plays is the sacramental significance of Baptism, Jesus' willing submission to the rite, and the justification of Baptism as a feature of the life of the church (*T* 85–88).

In contrast, Bale's play depends solely on preaching and controversies over the words of the Gospels, as Baleus Prolocutor in the epilogue of the play says to his audience, "God's waye is hys worde as the holy scripture sayth" (478). On John's mission, too, he comments:

Johan was a preacher—note wele what he ded teache:
Not mennis tradycyons, nor hys owne holye lyfe,
But to the people Christ Jesus ded he preache,
Wyllynge hys Gospell amonge them to be ryfe,
Hys knowledge heavenly to be had of man and wyfe.
(*JB*, 465–69)

John's preaching and argument helps to make the author's new Protestant doctrines known to the audience, or to his congregation, one might say.

Happé properly suggests that in Bale's plays the action is essentially "a verbal and rhetorical one with few physical acts."⁸ It cannot be denied that this preference for preaching rather than physical dramatic action on stage affects the very structure of his trilogy and at times interrupts even a dialogue.

For example, the subordination of drama to sermon can be typically seen in Baleus Prolocutor's direct address to the audience in the play. Bale's trilogy always begins and ends with a didactic speech by the author himself. In each play, he styles himself as one of the participants (=interlocutors) and appears on stage to deliver a prologue to his "most Christen audyence" (*GP* 1).

This expositor (Doctor or Contemplacio, whatever his name may be) was already present in the mystery cycles, acting as commentator, preacher, or presenter of the play. The doctor of the York cycle (*Y* 12) or Contemplacio of the N-Town cyce (*NT* 11, 13, 14) gives a summary or homiletic commentaries on what will happen or has happened in the body of the play. Thus, he aims at identifying himself with the audience and facilitating the audience participation in drama more easily.

“Baleus Prolocutor” follows this mystery tradition. He, like his predecessors in the mystery cycles, directly addresses the audience and gives advance information on the theme and its ethical and religious judgements. However, he, though in the medieval manner, even launches on referring to what the dramatist hesitated to present fully on stage.

The waye that Johan taught was not to weare harde clothyng,
To saye longe prayers, nor to wandre in the desart,
Or to eat wyld locusts. No, he never taught soch thyng.

Heare neyther Frances, Benedyct nor Bruno,
Albert nor Domynyck, for they newe rulers invent.
Beleve neyther Pope, nor prest of hys consent.

(*Ibid.*, 472–74; 488–90)

Here, the Prolocutor exhorts to the audience “to geve eare unto Christ; lete mennys vayne fantasies go . . .” (486–87) without heeding the stupid fallacy of Catholicism. He hardly emphasizes the sacramental significance of the Baptism as the mystery cycles do. Rather, Bale adopts his prologue and epilogue for a Protestant end. The Prolocutor’s speech expresses his anti-Popish attitude and the antipathy to the Roman Catholic clergy who distort God’s Word and misinterpret Scriptures by hypocrisy and corruption. This tendency to dramatize and fictionalize his own private beliefs is a typical feature of his polemical art. The Prolocutor urges the audience to “do penaunce.” However, His “penaunce” is of a different kind from that of the mystery cycles. Here penance means to shed off the spiritual blindness into which Roman Catholicism has trapped them, and to return to the Christ’s Gospel as the source of all truth and inspiration. Thus, it becomes gradually apparent that the Prolocutor’s long prologue and epilogue in each of the trilogy plays shows the author’s consistent insistence on the need for *the Word of God*.

Bale’s predilection for preachig also affects his selection of charactrs. This is consciously arranged so that John’s lofty mission as preacher may be emphasized. The introduction of the three classes of people represented by one character each: Turba Vulgaris, Publicanus and Miles Armatus is an example of this technique. The descriptions are based upon *Luke 3:10–14*, and the characters seldom step beyond their stereotype part, and yet suddenly become liveliest when they are least scriptural, or when they turn from general matters to more concrete contemporary ones, for example, to abuses of the time.

Bale’s John preaches to and converts these sinful masses, but very significantly, their repentance is of a different kind from its true meaning. The conversions of John’s converts center upon vocational sins. The Commoner’s sin is that he has been

both false and deceiving in all his works (120). The Tax Gatherer's sin is that he has oppressed the poor with his collection of taxes (141–45), and lastly, the Soldier's sin is that he supplemented his spare income by acts of violence (110–11). John's admonition to the soldier, for example, has been characterized as follows:

Of warre ye have lawes: use them with ryght always.
Do no spoyle, nor rape, take no unlauffull prayes.
The offyce ye have for the publyque unyte
Mynde to exercyse to the landes tranquyllyte.
Ye maye thus please God in doynge your feate ryght well.
(*Ibid.*, 177–81)

The brief descriptions of the soldier in *Luke* 3:14 that “No bullying, no blackmail, make do with your pay!” have been amplified to a lengthy explanation on his duty as a servant of sixteenth century England with special emphasis on the conduct of war. As a pledge of his repentance, the soldier is required to fulfill his duty, the faithful execution of the daily task. In other words, John emphasizes that Christian identity should be sought in the faithful performance of a divinely appointed vocation, and not in any special callings. John sums up:

Neyther your good workes, nor merytes of your fathers,
Your fastynges, longe prayers with other holy behavers
Shall yow afore God be able to justyfye,
Your affeccyons inwarde unless ye do mortyfye.
And therfor shewe fourth the due frutes of repentaunce;
Not in wordes only but from the hartes habundaunce.
Forsake your malyce, your pryde and hypocresye,
And now exercyse the frutefull dedes of mercye.
(*Ibid.*, 265–72)

This opposition to religious ceremonialism and repentance only in words is depicted most vividly in John's dialogue with the Vice-like figures of the Pharisee and Sadducee. The tone of the dialogue shows clearly that their creator Bale has in mind actual contemporary Catholics of his own day, not the Biblical Pharisees or Sadducees. The fact that the Sadducee accuses John of preaching new learning points in this direction. He asks John, “By whose autoryte doest thou teache thy newe lernynge?” (253) John's reply to this question is given in the epilogue thus:

If ye do penance, do soch as Johan doth counsell:
Forsake your olde lyfe and to the true fayth applye;

Washe away al fylth and folowe Christes Gospell.
The justyce of men is but an hypocresye,
A worke without fayth, an outwarde vayne glorye.
An example here ye had of the Pharysees,
Whom Johan compared to unfruteful, wythered trees.

Folowe Christes Gospell, and therin fructyfye,
To the prayse of God and hys sonne Jesus glorye.

(Ibid., 479–85; 491–92)

Bale emphasizes the point that no secular power can really produce a religious attitude and that “God’s waye is hys worde as the holy scripture sayth” (478). John’s preaching is made through his religious disputation. His struggle with the misconceptions of his converts and his defence of Christian faith against the Pharisee and Sadducee show that the author preferred “contested rather than received truth.”

In the Christ’s Baptism scene, the final section of the play, there is not much which can be considered as new or original. However, what is remarkable here is the hint given of John’s spiritual growth. By baptizing Jesus, John learns a great lesson that, as Jesus says to him, “The man whych have fayth lacketh no sanctyfycayon/ Necessary and mete for hys helth and salvacyon:” (419–20) Here is no longer such ceremonial mimicry of the mystery plays. Instead, the rational self-confidence of a Renaissance mind replaces the timidity of the medieval mystery figures. Bale’s John proves himself much wiser than John in the mystery plays because he awakens to the necessity of seeking God’s Grace by himself.

In reviewing Bale’s trilogy, Honor McCusker once said that:

... Their chief value lies in the fact that they are a late survival of a form which even in 1538 was very nearly outmoded, and which is still more important are the earliest example of a complete new use of that form.⁹

My conclusion is that although his trilogy adopted the mystery form as a genre, it is not a mere “late survival” of an outmoded form, but rather a pioneer’s attempt to use a new form—the form most suited for expressing his Protestant vision. The direct influence of the mystery cycles, as Happé says, may be “almost inconceivable,” but still it is a fact that the mystery tradition, directly or indirectly, whetted his appetite for composing a new type of Biblical play.

Notes

1. Hereafter referred to by the following abbreviations: *God's Promises* or *GP* for the first play; *John Baptist* or *JB* for the second; *The Temptation* or *TOL* for the third. All the subsequent line references to the plays will be inserted after each quotation.
2. Future references to Bale's trilogy are taken from *The Complete Plays of John Bale*, ed. Peter Happé, 2 vols. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985&1986).
3. Cf. List, nos. 2–9, *Illustrium Maioris Britanniae Scriptorum . . . Summarium* (Wesel, 1548), quoted in *The Complete Plays of John Bale*, ed. Happé, vol. I, p. 9.
4. Happé, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 9.
5. Bale, *Vocacyon of John Bale to the Bishopricke of Osorie in Ireland* (Wesel, 1553).
6. Baleus Prolocutor in Prologue to *TOL* refers to this play as "thys acte" (15), and "our next comedye" (31).
7. Hereafter referred to by the following abbreviations: *NT*, *T*, & *Y*. Further references to these plays are taken from *The N-Town Play*, ed. Stephen Spector, EETS, s.s. 11&12 (Oxford, 1961); *The Towneley Plays*, eds. G.E. England & A.W. Pollard, EETS, e.s. 71 (Oxford, 1897); *The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982).
8. Happé's note to *GP*, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 126.
9. Honor McCusker, *John Bale: Dramatist and Antiquity* (Bryn Mawr, 1942), p. 78.

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