

PLAYING PENTECOST IN YORK AND CHESTER: Transformations and Texts

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Pentecost or Whit, coming close to midsummer and to Corpus Christi, is a traditional time of feasting, sports, and merrymaking, accompanied by plays.¹ The feast commemorates the Descent of the Holy Ghost to the Apostles fifty days after the Resurrection of Christ. Since the first century it has terminated the Paschal season: St Paul refers to his intention to stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost in I Corinthians 16:8. Its origins are also associated with an ancient Jewish feast, the 'feast of weeks', an occasion for making thank-offerings to God referred to in Exodus 34:22 and Deuteronomy 16:10. The alternative popular name for the feast, 'Whitsunday' arose because it was one of the traditional occasions of baptism in the liturgical calendar of the early Church, and those presenting themselves for baptism wore white garments. Pentecost has special liturgical rank second only to Easter, and the Monday and Tuesday in the week are, like those of Holy Week, both Double feasts of the First Class.

Rosemary Woolf, admirable in a number of respects but not notable for her theatrical imagination, remarked that the episode is 'difficult to dramatise'.² Accordingly she believed that the N.Town dramatist was 'prudent' in compressing the entire event into forty lines of doxology recited by the Apostles, the expression of scepticism by attendant Jews, and a sermon by Peter. Woolf's approach was rigorously comparative, based on the now discredited premise that the English Mystery Plays of her title constituted a coherent genre of dramatic writing. Her simple model, privileging and homogenising mystery-play cycles, is now rejected as a consequence of the work on manuscripts and records which has been undertaken in the intervening thirty-five years. This does not mean that a comparative approach is no longer viable, but it does mean that any comparison has to attend to what is known of the discrete circumstances of production of each text. In what follows, I propose to explore how the treatment of Pentecost in York's Corpus Christi Play and Chester's Whitsun Play reflect the distinct devotional contexts and climates from which they survive.³ Fortunately, for the purposes of this paper, there is

no Pentecost pageant in the Towneley manuscript, or this essay would be a great deal longer.

The brief N.Town episode need not detain us long either except in distinction to York's. Both are fifteenth-century survivals, and both reflect liturgical practice. The N.Town episode is decorously constructed from the core fabric of liturgical worship — prayer and preaching — as counters to scepticism. It thus, like the rite of worship, simply bears witness to the effect of the intervention of the Spirit as it is understood to have operated since Pentecost, rather than recreating the moment. In York, on the other hand, a pageant evolved which sets out to re-enact the historical moment of the Descent of the Holy Spirit comprehended through mainstream theological commentary and mediated to the audience through the deployment of scriptural and liturgical textual resonances, as well as by theatrical effect.

In the climax to his *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, Nicholas Love calls Pentecost a 'swete and louely feste. For þis is þe feste of him þat is loue properly, as seynt gregour seiþ þat þe holi goste is loue.'⁴ He tells of how the Trinity determined to send the Holy Ghost to the Apostles, how it was done with 'a wondirfull noys in brennyng tonges vpon a hundret & twenty disciples' strengthening and empowering them, and of how through loving prayerfulness the individual can come to emulate the Apostles' condition. In an earlier section of the book, in his counter-blast against Lollards and their doubts about transubstantiation, Love also connects the feeling of taking the sacrament of the altar with the influx of the Holy Ghost:⁵

And it semeþ þat ioyful felyng in þe body is like to þat þat holi chirch singeþ of þe Apostles & disciples at þe feste of Pentecost, when þe holi goste was sent to hem sodeynly in þe likenes of fire withoutforþ, & vnspekable ioy in hir bodies withinforþ, þat is þat hir bowels filledde with þe holi goste ioyede souereynly in god.

Love offers a cue, apt in time, place, and ecclesiastical politics, to the significance of Pentecost in the York Corpus Christi play. In the play, it is a bridge between the pageants which recollect apparitions of Christ in scriptural history, and Corpus Christi itself which occurs only eleven days after the Whitsun feast in the annual festal calendar. It emphasises the transformational powers of the Holy Spirit.

The York Pentecost pageant is attributed to the Potters in both the 1415 *Ordo Paginarum* and in the later Register from which the texts of the pageants as we have them are derived.⁶ The association between craft and