

Humanity of christ in "the york play of the crucifixion"



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In the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, there was an emergence of creativity and imagination. These ideals were portrayed throughout the fields of human inquiry — artwork and entertainment being especially affected. A powerful example of such a newly creative dramatic style is the emergence of “mystery plays,” or plays that depicted the change in portrayal of Christ’s humanity. In earlier times, the Catholic church was very strict as to the interpretation of the Bible, with the pope’s word or interpretation being the only one allowable. Anyone who strayed from this interpretation could be heavily punished. With the emergence of the Renaissance, creativity spread not only into the secular arts but also the spiritual arts. The Catholic church began commissioning a series of mystery plays to enlighten the people regarding the gospel, and to a different kind of Christ than they had previously known — a Christ who was no longer harsh, silent, cold, and nothing like themselves. Mystery plays, such as the “York Play of the Crucifixion,” helped to portray the humanity of Christ through the use of character, comedy, and setting. In “The York Play of the Crucifixion,” the humanity of Christ is, somewhat unexpectedly, also depicted through the character development of the soldiers.

In the play, Christ is being taken by four soldiers to the hill to be crucified. The four soldiers are unnamed, possibly to help make the soldiers more universal and relatable to the audience. With this device, the viewers, or readers, are now able to find more in common with these soldiers, and detect resemblances to the soldiers in their complete disregard of Christ. The soldiers show this disregard with comments such as “Then to this work us must take heed/ So that our working be not wrang/ None other note to neven

is need/ But let us haste him for to hang" (25-28). These lines, spoken by soldiers one and two in the beginning of the play, introduce the audience to naivety of the soldiers, in that they have no idea of who they are crucifying. The soldiers, who represent all people, show how we can be blind to Christ and his atonement for us. The focus on Christ's act of atonement, and our place in remembering his sacrifice, is portrayed in a very different way in the "York Play of the Crucifixion," as compared to plays from earlier eras. The play is told by everyday soldiers, from mankind's perspective, to better depict our relationship with Christ. He is seen as just another traitor to be crucified: "Come on, let kill this traitor strong" (32). By having this perspective set before it, the audience is better able to see its relationship with Christ as a blessing, as a gift we should take advantage of, instead of taking in the previous beliefs that centered on our debt and natural sin. Christ himself speaks a few lines in the play, which accentuates his divine mercy.

Through the disregard of the soldiers and the contrast with Christ's constant passivity, both Christ's humanity and his divinity are portrayed. "Almighty God, my Father free...Here to dead I oblige me/ For that sin for to save mankind/ And sovereignly beseek I thee/ That they for me may favor find/ And from the Fiend them fend, So that their souls be safe" (51-58). These lines, the first spoken by Christ in the play, show the reader His great humility and forgiveness. The lines, thrown in the mix with the complaints of the soldiers, invoke painful emotions for the audience. Furthermore, Christ's humanity is show through references to his physical character, focusing on his bodily inflictions. 'Yea, asunder are both veins and sinews" (147). This

line shows the soldier's focus on Christ's human nature, on his bodily suffering, reminding the audience of His humanity. The character portrayal of both the soldiers and Christ help to emphasize His relationship with the common man, and His more human side.

The use of comedy in "The York Play of the Crucifixion" also serves to emphasize the humanity of Christ. The soldiers, common, everyday men, are preoccupied with their task, which is seen by them as menial and even annoying. There are comedic lines in the play, as well as an underlying current of humour throughout. Specific line examples can be found in a soldier's complaining of the craftsmanship of the cross and nailings: "It fails a foot and more/ The sinews are so gone in/ I hope that mark amiss be bored/ Then must he bide in bitter bale/ In faith, it was over-scantly scored" (107-112). These lines can be seen as operating on several levels. In one way, they offer comedic relief to such an emotional theme. In another, they serve to engage the audience. Offering a contrast with earlier interpretations of Christ's suffering, a comedic feel helps to draw in people to then hear a greater message. However, the comedy also operates as a contrast between the humility and submissiveness of Christ. A more painful example of their humor arises when the first soldier tells the second to continue beating Christ: "Strike on then hard, for him thee bought" (101). With the jokes and complete disregard of respect that the soldiers have, emphasis is put on the quietness of Christ, further calling attention to the theme of his humanity and of our relationship with Him. The comedy offers a realistic setting, allowing us to further relate to the soldiers. Furthermore, the actual setting of the play offers emphasis on the humanity of Christ. The play takes place in

one, static setting, allowing the characters and message to appear timeless. By putting the soldiers in such a setting, the audience is further able to relate to their experience. The lifting of the cross is also significant, in that, from an audience's standpoint, their focus has been primarily on the soldiers, but now is on Christ. It is an appropriate ending as it reminds again the audience of our duty in remembering Him, and how his humanity allows us to be able to have a divine relationship with Him.

"The York Play of the Crucifixion" is a prime example of the emerging creativity of the Renaissance. With previous depictions of Christ, in art as well as literature, as harsh and cold, the new portrayal of his humanity through mystery plays helped the people to hear the gospel and feel Christ's love in a new, more engaging, and more interpretive way. In "The York Play of the Crucifixion," various elements of character, humour, and plot work together to emphasize our relationship with Christ through his humanity.

Work Cited

Reidhead, Julia, ed. "Christ's Humanity." The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Vol. A. New York City: Norton, 2012. 440-47. Print.