Catharsis in an Augustinian Context: Towards an Understanding of THE MURDER OF ABEL and other Early English Dramas

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The Murder of Abel (or Mactacio Abel) is part of the Towneley cycle of early English drama. The plot of the play essentially follows the Old Testament tale, although it incorporates additional characters, an interesting comic dimension, and various staging effects. In its very essence, the Murder of Abel confronts the medieval (or, even, modern) audience with a series of potentially disturbing concepts: the murder of an innocent, the curse of barren wandering, and the consequence of eternal damnation.

In this article, I show how the Murder of Abel and other contemporaneous plays make use of two significant features of classical tragedy, described by Aristotle in his Poetics: (1) the protagonist’s hamartia (or ‘fatal flaw’), and (2) the ability of drama to set in motion the cleansing, or purgative, process of “catharsis” amongst audience members. Early English drama achieves all of this, I will suggest, whilst demonstrating a profoundly Augustinian sensibility about theatre.

Of course, as the theatre critic and theologian know well, St. Augustine voices a harsh critique of theatre in his Confessions, fueled by the realization that, in his youth, he had been “captivated by theatrical shows” (Conf. III.2.2). James Smith has noted this poses a serious problem for Augustine: “the desire for the spectacle [is] fueled by a deeper, idolatrous curiositas which sought sensible things as ends to be enjoyed in themselves rather than used as a means of knowing the Creator” (Conf. X.35.55, see Smith 124). Responding to Plato’s Phaedrus (247d; see Smith 125), as well as the critique of theatre in the Republic, Augustine is concerned that the theatre-goer enjoys the spectacle precisely because the images he observes on stage stir up disorderly passions within his soul. It is for this reason that Augustine bans theatre from his Christian utopia in The City of God.

The City of God goes on to deride the Greco-Roman theatre for its depiction of pagan religion and immoral gods; Augustine condemns, also, the actors who portray the gods caught in immoral acts on stage. The immorality of pagan theatre is particularly dangerous for Augustine, as both actor and audience not only witness the play, but
participate in the immoral act of worship:

As the major premises, the Greeks say that, if such gods are to be
worshipped, then certainly such men should be honored also. The
Romans state as the minor premises that such men should by no means
be honored. And the Christians conclude that such gods are therefore
by no means to be worshipped. (II.13, 66)

Augustine bans such practices from his utopian city for fear of the damage they may do
in light of the role of free will in his Christian epistemology: since man has the ability to
choose, he can, ultimately, make the “wrong decision,” and—tempted by the theatre—
turn away from God. (Plato bans the poets from his Republic for similar reasons.)

Eva Kimmich suggests that Augustine’s concerns for both free will and grace
function as a strong force in the “psychological battle of man against vice” (78). For
Augustine, “the efforts of the individual Christian therefore had to be directed toward
recognizing the direct connection between his conduct in his earthly life and the reward
of punishment awaiting him in the next world.” In the English cycle play, we encounter a
genre of theatre that satisfies some of St. Augustine’s concerns—offering us the chance to
rehabilitate theatre into the Christian worldview, or, as Smith has put it, making room for
a “Christian theatre” that does not undermine Augustine’s moral ideals. The cycle plays,
in effect, rely upon Christian themes and typology. But, it is in their cathartic potential
that they most embody a resolution to St. Augustine’s critique of theatre. By considering
a definition of catharsis that focuses on hamartia (as Augusto Boal does), one sees that
the dramaturgical structure of the cycle play attempts to “cleanse” the audience of their
sinful passions and to formulate them as good and obedient Christians.

As drama emerges from its post-Augustinian hiatus and begins to appear after
900 C.E. in Christian Europe, subject matter shifts from the pagan gods to the Christian
God, bringing with it a change in content and form. Literary scholar John Gardner notes
the important role energeia plays in Aristotelian dramatic structure. Aristotle’s energeia
is “the actualization of the potential which exists in character and situation” and thus
seems inconsistent in the cycle plays which depict the whole history of Humankind (past,
present, and future) as static (11).4 “If reality is the unchanging Supreme Good, if Nature
is God’s revelation of himself in emblematic form [. . .] then a concern with action is not
only unwarranted but perverse, a failure of right reason” (Gardner 11). Even given such
fundamental differences, one notes that both Greek tragedy as described by Aristotle
and the English cycle plays as they exist in surviving scripts have a very clear sense of
catharsis.

In chapter VI of his Poetics, Aristotle gives as his general definition of tragedy:
“the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself;
in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of
the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear,
wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions”(1449). This definition posits
catharsis as the purpose—or end—of tragedy. The audience members, in witnessing the
fate of others who suffer more than they, thus experience, at the end of the play, a sense
of relief or ekstasis (‘astonishment,’ or ‘trance’).5

Dana Sutton offers the following psycho-therapeutic interpretation:
[. . .]there are two possible interpretations of Aristotle’s theory of tragic
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Catharsis: 1.) that it purges the spectator merely of the anxiety (‘pity’) and fear created by the play itself; or 2.) that it purges the spectator of the anxiety and fear created by anxiety and fear and also of the same feelings having other causes. In the latter case, tragedy might be alleged to provide beneficial therapeutic function of purging the spectator of undesirable bad feeling and thus improving him. (41)

This view, though widespread, is not the only interpretation of catharsis. Augusto Boal gives a compelling argument linking catharsis with the socializing potential of theatre. He claims that what is being purged is not feelings (pity, fear, anxiety, or any other) but unacceptable social behavior, that is, the tragic flaw or “hamartia.” Boal goes even further and declares that such a system is in fact a coercive tool of the status quo used to oppress those who might be moved to stand outside of the status quo’s power. He writes: “the spectator experiences three changes of a rigorous nature: peripeteia, anagnorisis, and catharsis; he suffers a blow with regard to his fate (the action of the play), recognizes the error vicariously committed and is purified of the antisocial characteristic which he sees in himself” (40).

Tool of oppression or form of socialization, Boal’s argument that what is being purged is hamartia matches well St. Augustine’s concern with how theatre may cause people to behave. It is with such a socializing force in mind that this essay turns its attention to English cycle plays.

The English cycle plays are described by John C. Coldewey as “long compilations of dramatized biblical episodes that illustrate the cycle of human destiny from the creation of the world to the last judgment” (1). The plot of each pageant centers on one particular action, although sub-plots are possible. Each action is often a specific biblical event, such as Adam and Eve’s fall from grace in the York Man’s Disobedience and the Fall of Man, Abraham’s (near) sacrifice of Isaac in the Brome Abraham and Isaac, or Cain’s murder of his brother Abel in Towneley’s Murder of Abel. Some actions are not from specific Bible stories, but other Christian narratives, like The Creation and Fall of Lucifer, or English folk tales, such as the various Shepherd’s plays. Although they are not typical Aristotelian tragedies, they nonetheless often make use of interesting tragic elements.

The plotting of action reinforces a static, unchanging world view. The dramatic consequence of conflict in these plots is not to test the characters in order to allow growth or change in response to struggle; rather the plot serves to reveal the characters for who or what they already are. In the opening scene of The Murder of Abel, for example, Cain and his servant boy, Garcio (or in other editions “Pikeharness,” or just “Boy”), plow the land. Next, Abel enters and entreats Cain to make a pilgrimage with him to offer sacrifice of tithes to God. Reluctant at first, Cain decides to go. The following scene is at an altar. In accordance with the Bible story, Abel’s offering is accepted by God, but Cain’s is not. In jealous anger, Cain kills Abel (most extant scripts call for a jawbone as the murder weapon, as outlined in Cherrell Guilfoyle’s “The Staging of the First Murder”). Cain shows no remorse. As he is concerned about being caught and punished, he decides to hide. Cain tries to get Garcio to hide Abel’s body, but the boy refuses. Then God appears and punishes Cain with his curse: no matter how hard Cain works the earth, it will no longer yield him any food. In the end, Cain leaves with an address to the audience where he bids farewell:
Characters in the plays may be drawn from various sources in the Christian tradition. Many are from the Bible (e.g., Cain, Abel, Adam, Eve, Noah, Herod, Christ, God, Satan, the angels or devils). In adopting such characters, playwrights often rearrange the basic plot elements of the biblical narratives. For example, *The Fall of Man* pageant depicts the story of Adam and Eve. However, it is not the serpent from the Old Testament (Genesis 3), but Satan himself who tempts Eve. (By directly associating the serpent with Satan, the author interprets the biblical text for his audience.) Other non-biblical, and even non-Christian, characters also appear. These are usually common character types. Thus, Garcio from *The Murder of Abel* is a common clown character, cracking jokes and giving Cain humorous grief. Other examples include the soldier Watkins in *Killing the Children*, the thieving Mak in the *Second Shepherd's Play*, and the various characters judged in different versions of *The Last Judgment*.

Many of the characters will be recognizable to spectators as representing a re-occurring typology. Specifically, many of the plays include a Christ figure. Character typology was a well established aspect of “scriptural interpretation” (15-16) during the Middle Ages:

- Characters or incidents in the Old Testament were seen as types prefiguring Christ or the sacrifice of Christ[...]. Noah could be seen as a ‘type’ of Christ for he saved the (good) world from destruction with the Ark during the Flood; Abraham and Isaac prefigured the sacrifice of Christ for Abraham was a father who was prepared to sacrifice his son as God would later sacrifice His Son. (Richardson and Johnston 15-16)

Richardson and Johnston continue to describe typology of this sort within medieval Christian thought as “a universal common part of the individual’s understanding of the Bible, for the audience as well as the actors and creators of the plays” (16). The perspective of typology is also present in the Cain and Abel story, and is probably one reason for its inclusion in the cycles. Abel is the obedient son/brother who reveres God and is innocently slain, as was Christ the obedient Son of God/Brother of Man who is innocently slain. Further, as Richardson and Johnston explain “Abel is the son of Eve, the woman responsible for the Fall, and Christ is the son of Mary, the woman responsible for the Salvation of the world” (34).

In addition to characters typologically associated with the Christ figure, Lucifer is another important element of many of these plays. The character of Lucifer is essential to the cycles, as they begin with the creation story, which primarily focuses on Lucifer’s identity as God’s brightest angel, and his exile from heaven due to vanity. Thereafter, Lucifer appears either directly as a character, such as in *Man’s Disobedience and the Fall of Man*, or as a character type in the various depictions of vainglorious, sinful behavior. So Cain is depicted as guilty of vanity, putting his own needs before obedience to God. And, in the end, he becomes Satan’s slave. In addition to Cain, other Lucifer types include Herod and Mak. Characters such as these, presented as already corrupt and doomed to eternal punishment, figure as type in the spectators’ minds. They reference Lucifer’s
original fall from grace and his subsequent troubling of humankind.

It is important to keep in mind the process of aesthetic typology because, to a modern reader, Cain might seem, as Diller warrants, “relativized” (231). Cain voices a certain reason for his reluctance; with a sharp comic edge, Cain may well gain “unwarranted sympathies” (231) from the medieval audience. However, Cain can never completely transcend his association by type with Lucifer, and any qualities that stimulate “sympathies” would only do so as part of engendering the oncoming cathartic effect.

So what then is the source of pity and fear in these plays? Aristotle defined fear as “a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future” (Rhetoric 1382); elsewhere he defined pity as a feeling of pain “caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it [...]. In order to feel pity, we must obviously be capable of supposing that some evil may happen to us or some friend of ours” (Rhetoric 1385). These definitions of pity and fear intersect with the power of drama to create mental pictures of suffering in others and to create feelings of empathy in audience members. Pity and fear as such work to create the recognition that Kimminich suggests St. Augustine would want of individual Christians—“recognizing the direct connection between his conduct in his earthly life and the reward or punishment awaiting him in the next world” (78).

Early English drama tends to depict two levels of consequence which aim to inspire such feelings of pity or fear in a Christian audience. One is spiritual damnation. This consequence is made clear as character after character is linked typologically to Lucifer and then sent to Hell. For example, when Herod dies in the Chester Death of Herod, a devil comes to take him away, delivering to the audience a speech describing some of the tortures that Herod will endure:

And with this crooked cudgel your backs I’ll claw
And all false believers burn and blow,
That from the crown of head to the toe
I leave no right whole fell[skin]. (62-65)

Characters frequently experience earthly consequences in punishment for their sins, as well. While Cain’s afterlife is one of damnation, the rest of his earthly life will be spent in fruitless toil and wandering. In the Second Shepherd’s Play, the deceitful Mak and his equally shifty wife, Gil, lead lives of isolation from a community that does not trust them. Adam and Eve must leave Paradise to endure a future of hard labor, in addition to the shame and guilt brought by their disobedience. In many other cases, the consequences are even more immediate, painful, and bloody. Jody Enders provides a comprehensive study of suffering in her book The Medieval Theatre of Cruelty; she claims that medieval authorities encouraged a staged connection between bad choices and physical suffering “as a means of coercing theatre audiences into accepting the various ‘truths’ enacted didactically in mysteries, miracles, and even farces” (4). While Cain might show no remorse, audience members must pity the slain Abel and recognize Cain’s pride as the murder’s cause, and the justice of his material and eternal punishment.

Such dramatic moments invite the spectator to consider the centrality of hamartia, the fatal flaw, in achieving catharsis. Aristotle indicated that this flaw is the cause of the downfall for otherwise admirable characters. Watching the tragic consequences of an error in judgment or reasoning inspires pity or fear that serves as a corrective for the
audience member; I suggest that the same is true for the flawed characters in cycle plays. It is consistent with St. Augustine’s desire not to confuse his Christian flock with mixed messages about morality. Thus, Lucifer in the York Creation and Fall of Lucifer, begins with many good qualities, but ultimately fails due to his own hamartia. God proclaims:

Of all that I have made the most next to me
I make thee master and mirror of my might
I Shield thee at once in bliss to be
And I name thee “Lucifer” as bearer of light. (35-38)

Lucifer is an angel, beautiful, “a bearer of light,” and closest of all creatures to God. Of course, the medieval audience would be aware that Lucifer is also flawed, will rebel presently, and be cast away from God into Hell. They would also have understood keenly that Lucifer’s fall both pre-figures and sets in motion man’s fall, and that subsequent villain “types” will exhibit the same hamartia.

Let us not forget, though, that the cause of each fall is in essence the same. In The Creation and the Fall of Lucifer, God goes on to say to Lucifer,

No thing here shall be thee be harming
In this bliss shall be thy dwelling
And may all wealth in thy wielding (sic)
Be while thou art obediently yielding (my italics, 39-43)

Lucifer immediately declares his own beauty; in his vanity, he disobeys God by affirming himself as equal to Him. For this effort to make himself into God, he and his followers are banished. This, then, is the central hamartia—the essential fatal flaw—which cycle plays depict and actively reproach, and which church and civic leaders try to purge from their citizens: disobedience before God. Such disobedience is, at the core, a state of being, and may lead to acts of genuine malice, ignorance, or disbelief.

There is a notable political aspect to this process. Gardner develops the idea of “feudal interdependence,” outlining that the average commoner in this time period would readily recognize God and Satan as opposing lords, with feudalism providing “[...]the basis of the contrast between Abel and Cain” (25). Gardner emphasized that “the feudal interdependence of all stations within the scheme plentitude is based upon the love of lord for vassal and vassal for lord (as Abel knows), not upon obligation, or debt” (25).

Thus, Abel’s willing dependence on God contrasts with Cain’s sullen, half-hearted obedience. The events of the play set up a dichotomy between the brothers. As anthropologist Rene Girard suggests in Violence and the Sacred, there are many biblical narratives about brothers focused upon differentiation between moral types. “[T]he difference between them [brothers] is less than between all other degrees of relation[...] The proliferation of enemy brothers in [...] dramatic adaptation of myth implies the continual presence of a sacrificial crisis” (61). The Murder of Abel particularly demonstrates this cathartic effect. The two major characters are plainly Christian didactic character types. The audience identifies Abel as a Christ figure; the action also allows them to align Cain with Lucifer. Vain and scornful, Cain perceives his relation to God as one of obligation, not love—like Lucifer. In making his tithe, Cain selfishly prioritizes his own corporeal needs and offers the worst of his harvest, clearly disobeying God’s law. Stinging from God’s rebuke, he jealously murders Abel (prefiguring Christ’s passion). The spectators experience terror and/or pity in response. Within a Christian context, the implications of
the outcome are clear and dire. Following Girard’s logic, Abel is worthy and innocent; Cain is hard-hearted and a murderer. God gives Cain two punishments: one corporeal, in the form of the curse that makes Cain’s land barren and dooms him to vagrancy; the other, spiritual damnation. Both are potentially terrifying for a medieval Christian audience, and they recognize Cain’s predicament as a direct result of his \textit{hamartia}, his disobedience of God. Thus, earthly security and spiritual salvation depend on obedience to Divine and earthly authority.

Such a cathartic socialization of the spectator is evident in \textit{The Murder of Abel} and other early English dramas. Travis generalizes:

\begin{quote}
The Corpus Christi play—like the Mass, the feast, and the procession—was a type of sacred action performed in order to evoke, express, and \textit{sustain the community’s} faith in the ultimate meaning of God’s presence in their lives. Like the ceremonies to which it was added, the play projected (through an active, melodic, and verbal medium) the central religious beliefs of its society. (my italics, 12)
\end{quote}

This sustaining quality applies also to the feudal nature of daily politics, as the “language and stage business summon up the scheme of feudalism both here on earth and in heaven” (Gardner 25).

In conclusion, the cycle plays share with Aristotelian drama a powerful cathartic effect, especially as described by Boal. St. Augustine himself shows clear distress in this socializing nature when he asks “What man is there, then, who will not consider that, in living his own life, he ought rather to follow the examples set in plays performed by divine institution” (II. 8, 59). This recognition of the power of theatre harmonizes with Boal’s more sinister claim:

\begin{quote}
Let there be no doubt: Aristotle formulated a very powerful purgative system, the object of which is to eliminate all that is not commonly accepted, including the revolution, before it takes place [. . .] It appears in many and varied shapes and media. But its essence does not change: it is designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre-exists. If this is what we want, the Aristotelian system serves this purpose better than any other[...](47).
\end{quote}

Furthermore, the cycle plays can be understood within an Augustinian framework in which \textit{hamartia} and catharsis function in Christian discourse. These plays fulfill St. Augustine’s hope for a dramaturgy that replaces pagan practices with the Divinely-ordained imperatives of Christian practice. Plays like \textit{The Murder of Abel} provided their intended audience with powerful cathartic purgation of \textit{hamartia} (disobedience to God), and their dramatic structure reflects an Augustinian sensibility. Understanding these theological underpinnings enables the contemporary reader to understand better the cathartic dynamic within playwriting and performance practices of the period.

\textit{Notes}

1. The Towneley manuscript is owned by the Huntington Library (MS HM 1); in its very title, the \textit{Mactacio Abel} is identified as the second play (\textit{segunda pagina}) of the
2. The story of Cain’s murder of Abel, narrated in Genesis 4, was extraordinarily popular during the Middle Ages. It figures prominently in the sculpture programs of medieval cathedrals. For a good example, see the sculptures in the Chapter House of Salisbury Cathedral in England.

3. I am using Henry Chadwick’s translation of the Confessions.

4. For an engaging review of some of the philosophical and aesthetic arguments surrounding the key concepts of Greek tragedy, see Martha C. Nussbaum.

5. Aristotle discusses the relationship between *energeia* and *entelecheia* in the *Metaphysics* (0.6, 1048a25).

6. Does acknowledging this political aspect automatically equal the forces of oppression described by Boal? That question is for another forum, one that is more concerned with political implications of power relationships.

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**Works Consulted**


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