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### **The Rhetoric of Stasis and Chaos in the York Judgement Play**

The York Play of the Last Judgement, coming at the end of the day-long performance of this important Corpus Christi cycle from medieval and early modern York, was an impressive spectacle, as a still extant description of the Mercer's Judgement pageant wagon suggests. The catastrophe of the end of the world was a visually striking event, complete with clockwork angels, a lift for God, and a spectacular Hell; as one of the richest guilds in the city, the Mercers could afford it. However, it is also a rhetorical tour de force that underscores the Augustinian concepts of righteous stasis and chaotic evil that Alexandra Johnston has argued shape the cycle as a whole.<sup>1</sup> An analysis of the rhetorical structure of this play demonstrates the extent to which rhetorical stasis and chaos are balanced to shape a dramatized event that is both a catastrophe and a divine consummation.

Augustine's notion of stasis is articulated at several points in his writings.<sup>2</sup> What is perhaps the best expression of it for my present purposes occurs in his *De doctrina*

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandra F. Johnston, "'At the Still Point of the Turning World': Augustinian Roots of Medieval Dramaturgy," *European Medieval Drama* 2 (1997): 5-24; see also Alexandra F. Johnston, "His language is lorne': The Silent Centre of the York Cycle," *Early Theatre* 3 (2000): 185-195 and Alexandra F. Johnston, "The Word Made Flesh: Augustinian Elements in the York Cycle," *The Centre and its Compass: Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor John Lyerle* (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University Press, 1993): 225-46.

<sup>2</sup> My deliberate use of Augustine's concept of the unchanging nature of goodness is not a 'Robertsonian flip' as an over-reliance upon the influence of Augustine is sometimes called with reference to the work of D. W. Robertson; rather, the potential influence of the Austin Friary upon the content and structure of the York Plays is such that more investigation is needed. Cf. K. W. Humphreys, ed., *The Friars' Libraries*,

*Christinana*, the work that contains Augustine's rhetoric in Book IV. Book I Chapter 8 includes a clear articulation of what Augustinian stasis is:

Et quoniam omnes qui de Deo cogitant, vivum aliquid cogitant, illi soli possunt non absurda et indigna existimare de Deo qui vitam ipsam cogitant. [...]Deinde ipsam vitam pergunt inspicere, et si eam sine sensu vegetantem invenerint, qualis est arborum, praeponunt ei sentientem, qualis est pecorum; et huic rursus intelligentem, qualis est hominum. Quam cum adhuc mutabilem viderint, etiam huic aliquam incommutabilem coguntur praeponere, illam scilicet vitam quae non aliquando desipit aliquando sapit, sed est potius ipsa Sapientia. Sapiens enim mens, id est, adeptam sapientiam, antequam adipisceretur non erat sapiens; at vero ipsa Sapientia nec fuit umquam insipiens, nec esse umquam potest. Quam si non viderent, nullo modo plena fiducia vitam incommutabiliter sapientem commutabili vitae anteponerent. Ipsam quippe regulam veritatis, qua illam clamant esse meliorem, incommutabilem vident; nec usquam nisi supra suam naturam vident, quandoquidem se mutabiles vident.<sup>3</sup>

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Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues, Vol. 1 (London: British Library, 1990) for a list of books by Augustine held by the Austin Friars in York.

<sup>3</sup> S. Aurelii Augustini, *De Doctrina Christiana Libri Quatuor*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. J. P. Migne, *PL* 34 (Paris: Garnier, 1865) 22-23. [And since all who think about God think of Him as living, they only can form any conception of Him that is not absurd and unworthy who think of Him as life itself[...].]Then, when they go on to look into the nature of the life itself, if they find it mere nutritive life, without sensibility, such as that of plants, they consider it inferior to sentient life, such as that of cattle; and above this, again, they place intelligent life, such as that of men. And, perceiving that even this is subject to change, they are compelled to place above it, again, that unchangeable life which is not at one time foolish, at another time wise, but on the contrary is wisdom itself. For a wise intelligence, that is, one that has attained to wisdom, was, previous to its attaining wisdom, unwise. But wisdom itself never was unwise, and never can become so. And if men never caught sight of this wisdom, they could never with entire confidence prefer a life which is unchangeably wise to one that is subject to change. This will be evident, if we consider that the

The essential stasis of God that the one-time rhetor Augustine asserts here becomes not just a theological concept but also a rhetorical strategy that undercuts human attempts to speak. "Diximusne aliquid et sonuimus aliquid dignum Deo?" he writes. "Immo vero nihil me aliud quam dicere voluisse sentio; si autem dixi, non hoc est quod dicere volui. Hoc unde scio, nisi quia Deus ineffabilis est, quod autem a me dictum est, si ineffabile esset, dictum non esset?"<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, human and demonic attempts to register the Judgement in verbal form are doomed to chaotic failure compared to God's rhetorical performance of unchanging stability.

The first words the audience hears are those of God the Father; while much of the content of the Judgement Play as a whole is taken from Matthew 25, God's words here bear closer examination:

Men seis the worlde but vanité,  
 YOitt will no manne beware therby;  
 Ilke a day ther mirroure may thei se,  
 YOitt thynke thei noyot that thei schall dye.  
 All that euere I saide schulde be  
 Is nowe fulfillid thurgh prophicie,  
 Therefore nowe is it tyme to me  
 To make endyng of mannes folie.  
 I haue tholed mankynde many a yoere

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very rule of truth by which they affirm the unchangeable life to be the more excellent, is itself unchangeable: and they cannot find such a rule, except by going beyond their own nature; for they find nothing in themselves that is not subject to change.] Augustine, *Saint Augustin's Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Scribners, 1887) 524-25.

<sup>4</sup> [Have I spoken of God, or uttered His praise, in any worthy way? Nay, I feel that I have done nothing more than desire to speak; and if I have said anything, it is not what I desired to say. How do I know this, except from the fact that God is unspeakable?] 524.

In luste and likyng for to lende,  
 And vnethis fynde I ferre or nere  
 A man that will his misse amende.  
 In erthe I see butte synnes seere,  
 Therefore myne aungellis will I sende  
 To blawe ther bemys, that all may here  
 The tyme is comen I will make ende.<sup>5</sup>

The anonymous playwrights here link Augustine's theological concept of the stasis of God ("All that euere I saide schulde be/Is nowe fulfillid thurgh prophicie") with a decided lack of rhetorical elaboration, a fact that may seem surprising given the divinity of the speaker, the enormity of the event He is enacting verbally, and even the alliterative nature of the verse of the York Plays. But here, too, Augustine's influence can be seen in the rhetorical restraint he prescribes as proper for the good: "In populo autem gravi, de quo dictum est Deo: *In populo gravi laudabo te* [Ps. 35.18], nec illa suavitas delectabilis est qua non quidem iniqua dicuntur, sed exigua et fragilia bona spumeo verborum ambitu ornantur, quali nec magna atque stabilia decenter et graviter ornarentur."<sup>6</sup> Thus, God's verbal restraint as He enacts the end of the world is in keeping with the Augustinian rhetorical prescription for modelling divine stasis.

The restraint of God's rhetoric is further mirrored in the play in the speeches of

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<sup>5</sup> *York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982): 408.  
 <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/York/1:50?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>>, accessed 04 February 2013. All subsequent references will be to this edition; the electronic text has been altered slightly from its print form to replace yoghs and thorns with 'yo' and 'th'.

<sup>6</sup> *De Doctrina Christiana* 102. [In a serious assembly, moreover, such as is spoken of when it is said, "I will praise Thee among much people," (4) no pleasure is derived from that species of eloquence which indeed says nothing that is false, but which buries small and unimportant truths under a frothy mass of ornamental words, such as would not be graceful or dignified even if used to adorn great and fundamental truths.], *Saint Augustin's Christian Doctrine* 584.

the good souls who arise at God's bidding. Good Soul 1 provides an example:

Loued be thou lorde, that is so schene,  
 THat on this manere made vs to rise,  
 Body and sawle togedir, clene,  
 To come before the high justise.  
 Of oure ill dedis, lorde, thou not mene,  
 That we haue wroght vppon sere wise,  
 But graunte vs for thy grace bedene  
 THat we may wonne in paradise.

What is interesting about this response is that it is cast not only in restrained rhetorical terms but also follows Augustine's dictum regarding the relationship between eloquence and prayer:

Agit itaque noster iste eloquens, cum et iusta et sancta et bona dicit, neque enim alia debet dicere, agit ergo quantum potest cum ista dicit, ut intellegenter, ut libenter, ut oboedienter audiatur. Et haec se posse, si potuerit et in quantum potuerit, pietate magis orationum quam oratorum facultate non dubitet, ut orando pro se ac pro illis quos est allocuturus, sit orator antequam dictor. Ipsa hora iam ut dicat accedens, priusquam exserat proferentem linguam, ad Deum leuet animam sitientem, ut eructet quod biberit, vel quod impleverit fundat.<sup>7</sup>

The tendency here is to emphasize the unchanging stability of God and all those attached to Him, even in the context of the end of time. Rhetoric is at the limits of itself at this point in

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<sup>7</sup> *De Doctrina Christiana* 103. [And so our Christian orator, while he says what is just, and holy, and good (and he ought never to say anything else), does all he can to be heard with intelligence, with pleasure, and with obedience; and he need and so far as he succeeds, he will succeed more by piety in prayer than by gifts of oratory; and so he ought to pray for himself, and for those he is about to address, before he attempts to speak. And when the hour is come that he must speak, he ought, before he opens his mouth, to lift up his thirsty soul to God, to drink in what he is about to pour forth, and to be himself filled with what he is about to distribute.], *Saint Augustin's Christian Doctrine* 584-85.

the play since it too will be abandoned along with all other spatial and temporal forms at the Last Judgement; its proper use at these limits, for Augustine and the anonymous playwrights, is for prayer and the stasis it communicates.

This is in sharp contrast to the deployment of rhetoric by evil figures in the play. The change in verbal texture is immediately apparent as Bad Soul 2 laments the chaos that is its lot:

Als carefull caitiffis may we ryse,  
 Sore may we wringe oure handis and wepe;  
 For cursidnesse and for covetise  
 Dampned be we to helle full depe.  
 Rought we neuere of Goddis seruise,  
 His comaundementis wolde we noyot kepe,  
 But ofte than made we sacrafise  
 To Satanas when othir slepe.  
 Allas, now wakens all oure were,  
 Oure wikkid werkis may we not hide,  
 But on oure bakkis vs muste them bere-  
 Thei wille vs wreye on ilke a side.  
 I see foule feendis that wille vs feere,  
 And all for pompe of wikkid pride.  
 Wepe we may with many a teere,  
 Allas, that we this day schulde bide.  
 Before vs playnly bese fourth brought  
 THE dedis that vs schall dame bedene;  
 THAT eres has herde, or harte has thoght,  
 Sen any tyme that we may mene,  
 THAT fote has gone or hande has wroght,

That mouthe hath spoken or ey has sene-  
 THis day full dere thanne bese it boght;  
 Allas, vnborne and we hadde bene.

The heavy use of alliteration, proscribed as a fault if overused in the ubiquitous pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*,<sup>8</sup> is not an accident, even in the context of alliterative verse. This lament sounds chaotic, fearful, full of the ever-shifting Chaos that Augustine considers in his *Confessions*: "et haec quid est? numquid animus? numquid corpus? numquid species animi vel corpus? si dici posset 'nihil aliquid' et 'est non est' hoc eam dicerem."<sup>9</sup> Evil in this play has many lines, and often despairs in rhetorically complex ways, but its rhetoric slopes downwards towards chaos.

Such patterns of heavy alliteration and their attendant emotional energy are present in the language of the devils who have come to carry the bad souls off to Hell. A short speech from Diabolus 1 illustrates this:

Felas, arraye vs for to fight,  
 And go we faste oure fee to fange.  
 THE dredefull dome this day is dight-  
 I drede me that we dwelle full longe.

Both the content and the form of this speech suggest anything but stasis. As it does in the speech of Bad Soul 2, heavy alliteration characterizes these lines, and this fact would not have been lost on the audience.<sup>10</sup> A world away from the ordered praise of Good Soul 1 or

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<sup>8</sup> "et si vitabimus eiusdem litterae nimiam adsuittatem" ["We shall also avoid excessive recurrence of the same letter"], *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) 271-72. Cf. James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1974) 18ff. for the popularity of this ancient Roman rhetoric in the Middle Ages.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *St. Augustine's Confessions*, vol. 2, trans. William Watts, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1951) 296, ["And this changeableness, what is it? Is it a soul, or is it a body? Or is it any figure of a soul or a body? If it could be said A something nothing, and An is is not, I would say, this were it"] 297.

<sup>10</sup> The York Cycle was produced in its entirety in June 1998 at the University of Toronto under the auspices of the Poculi Ludique Societas, the Medieval and Renaissance Players of Toronto. Among the many things that production demonstrated to scholars of early English drama, it made it clear that the speeches of the

the Angels, Diabolus 1 deploys cacophonous exhortative rhetoric to urge his fellow devils on to battle with its attendant chaos and the bitter gain of bad souls to share in their eternal damnation.

As is fitting for a play dramatizing the Last Judgement, God has the last word:

Mi chosen childir, comes vnto me,  
 With me to wonne nowe schall yoe wende  
 THere joie and blisse schall euer be,  
 YOoure liffe in lyking schall yoe lende.  
 YOe cursed kaitiffis, fro me yoe flee,  
 In helle to dwelle withouten ende,  
 THer yoe schall neuere butt sorowe see  
 And sitte be Satanas the fende.  
 Nowe is fulfillid all my forthoght,  
 For endid is all erthely thyng.  
 All worldly wightis that I haue wroght,  
 Aftir ther werkis haue nowe wonnyng.  
 Thei that wolde synne and sessid nocht,  
 Of sorowes sere now schall thei syng,  
 And thei that mendid thame whils thei mought  
 Shall belde and bide in my blissing.

Once again, the rhetoric here is characterized by the balance and restraint that Augustine deems appropriate for Christians to use at all times.<sup>11</sup> Stasis is emphasized repeatedly throughout this final speech. "THere joie and blisse schall euer be" for those who are aligned with Him while the bad souls and devils are condemned " In helle to dwelle withouten ende"; finally, God can pronounce "Nowe is fulfillid all my forthoght/ For endid

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'bad' figures in the plays are qualitatively different than those of the 'good' figures, even for an audience without the text listening to an outdoor performance.

<sup>11</sup> *De Doctrina Christiana* 102.



is all erthely thyng." His rhetoric, like His existence, signifies an unchanging state outside of a spatial/temporal world that the York audience sees end before their eyes.

Although the work of Alexandra F. Johnston and others has begun to sketch out the extent to which the Augustinian friary at York may have had a shaping influence upon the York cycle, more work needs to be done. A sustained study of the influence of Augustine's thought in these plays has yet to be completed. This is an important desideratum for the continued study of the most complete of the extant Corpus Christi cycles. We have had the records of the production of the cycle at our disposal since the groundbreaking *Records of Early English Drama: York* were published in 1977, and thanks to that vital work we now have a much more comprehensive picture of the production history of the cycle. It is now time to focus on the intellectual history of these plays; even conjectural work in this area will add to our understanding of this sophisticated drama.