THE CHESTER MYSTERY CYCLE

A New Edition with Modernised Spelling

by

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No more joy to me is led, given
save only Eve my wife.

EVE
Alas! Now is my son slain?
690 Alas, marred is all my main!
Alas, must I never be fain
but in woe and mourning?
Well I wot and know that
verray vengeance it is.
695 For I to God so did amiss,
mon I never have liking.

CAIN
Yea, dame and sire, farewell ye!
For out of land I will flee.
A losel ay I must be,
for scaped am of thrift.'
700 For so God hath told me,
that I shall never thrive ne thee.
And now I flee, all ye may see.
I grant you all the same gift.
THE END

PLAY 3: NOAH'S FLOOD

Performed by the Waterleaders and Drawers of Dee

The theme of Man's separation from God through sin continues in play 3 with the account of the destruction of all living things by a great flood sent from God in his anger against sinful mankind. Only Noah and his wife, and his three sons and their wives are spared, because of their righteousness, and are entrusted with the responsibility of building a boat, the ark, in which breeding specimens of all animal species will be preserved to re-stock the earth when the flood subsides. The grace shown to Noah is the first sign of God's mercy to his servants, and God's promise of greater forbearance in future is confirmed in the final vision of the rainbow.

The main events in the play derive from Genesis 6.1–9.17, but in common with other playwrights, the Chester dramatist transforms the universal flood into a more manageable episode of domestic relationships, focusing in a non-biblical fashion upon Noah's independently-minded wife (played by a man or boy). The play has as background the town and its society, and Noah should be imagined as a craftsman whose sons are following him into the trade, while his wife is a prosperous burger's wife with a circle of drinking-companions whom she does not want to abandon to sail in an absurdly designed vessel.

It should perhaps be noted that the major episode of the sending out of the birds is found only in the manuscript of 1607. Its absence from the other four manuscripts may indicate some damage or loss in the

700 "For I am escaped from the means of earning my livelihood." Cain has, in fact, become a "scapethrift" or "waster."
The Chester Mystery Cycle

common exemplar, which the final scribes were able to rectify; but it has been noticed that the version of the play without that section is dramatically intelligible. In the version here, the despatch of the birds is included.

The Pre-Reformation Banns enjoin the Waterleaders and Drawers in Dee (an appropriate choice for the play) to "loke that Noyes shipp be sett on hie," and the ark-shaped waggon was clearly the major scenic feature. It has on its sides means to attach the pictures of the animals listed by the family as entering the ark, and Noah raises a mast upon it, perhaps with a sail, and certainly with a pulley-device along which the birds are sent out to see if the flood has abated sufficiently. The ark must have means of access from the ground, since the family is standing beside it at the start of the play, and it is big enough to accommodate the eight characters inside for the duration of the flood. Presumably the construction-work, the episode with the Wife and her Gossips, and the final sacrifice are performed on ground-level.

In addition, the opening stage-direction asks that God be located "in some high place," perhaps a stage separate from the waggon. Perhaps he oversees the whole action of the play, though he may enter only for his speeches and then depart; his presence or absence will, however, have a significant effect upon the audience's perception of the action. The rising waters of the flood have been effectively represented in modern productions by large sheets of blue cloth, moved by "angel" stage-hands, which can be raised to envelop the gossips. The rainbow in modern productions is usually raised up from inside the waggon so that it appears above the ark.

The drinking-song of the Gossips is a raucous affair, to be contrasted with the hymn which the 1607 manuscript requires the Noah family to sing within the ark.

CAST GOD, NOAH, SHEMA, HAM, JAPETH, NOAH'S WIFE, SHEMA'S WIFE, HAM'S WIFE, JAPETH'S WIFE, THE GOOD GOSSPIS.

ANDFIRST in some high place—or in the clouds, if it may be—
God speaketh unto Noah standing without the ark with all his family.

GOD I, God, that all this world hath wrought, from nothing
Heaven and Earth and all of nought, made
I see my people in deed and thought

PLAY 3: NOAH'S FLOOD

are set foul in sin.
My ghost shall not leng in mon
that through flesh-like is my fone
—but till six score years
be comen and gone
to look if they will blin.

Man that I made I will destroy,
beast, worm, and fowl to fly;
for on Earth they do me noy,
harm the folk that are thereon.
It harms me so hurtfully,
the malice that doth now multiply,
that sore it grieves me inwardly
that ever I made mon.

Therefore, Noah, my servant free,
that righteous man art as I see,
a ship soon thou shalt make thee
of trees dry and light.
Little chambers therein thou make
sealing mud
and binding slutch also thou take;
don't be idle
within and without thou ne slake
to anoint it through all thy might.

Three hundred cubits it shall be long
and fifty broad to make it strong;
of height sixty. The meet thou fong;
thus measure thou it about.
One window work through thy wit;
round
cubit of length and breadth make it.
Upon the side a door shall sit,
be located
for to come in and out.
Eating places thou make also
round
three: rochet chambers one or two;
for with water I think to flow
have made
Man that I can mase.

10 "Animal, reptile, and flying bird." Strictly, "to fly" depends upon "I made" in the preceding line.

24 "Of height sixty. You take the measurement."

50
THE CHESTER MYSTERY CYCLE

Destroyed all the world shall be—
save thou, thy wife, thy sons three,
and their wives also with thee—
shall fall before thy face.'

Ah, Lord, I thank thee loud and still
that to me art in such will
and spares me and my household
to spill,
as I now soothly find.
Thy bidding, Lord, I shall fulfill
and never more thee grieve me still,
that such grace hath sent me till
amongst all Mankind.

Have done, ye men and women all.
Hie ye, lest this water fall,
to work this ship, chamber and hall,
as God hath bidden us do.

Father, I am already boun;
an axe I have, by my crown,
as sharp as any in all this town
for to go thereto.

I have an hatchet wonder keen
to bite well, as may be seen;
a better ground, as I ween,
is not in all this towns.
And I can well make a pin'
and with this hammer knock it in.
Go we work, without more din,
and I am ready boun.

And we shall bring timber to,

PLAY 3: NOAH'S FLOOD

66 for we mon nothing else do.
Women been weak to underfo
any great travails.

SHEM'S WIFE
Here is a good hackstock;
hammer

WIFE
on this you may hew and knock.

71 Shall none be idle in this flock,
ne now may no man fail.

HAM'S WIFE
And I will go gather slitch,
the ship for to clame and pitch.

75 Anoint it must be, every stitch,
board, tree, and pin.

JAPETH'S WIFE
And I will gather chips here
to make a fire for you in fere,

80 against you come in.

Then Noah beginneth to build the ark.

SHEM
Now in the name of God I begin
to make the ship that we shall in,
that we may be ready for to swim
at the coming of the flood.

These boards I pin here together
to bear us safe from the weather,
that we may row both hither and thither
and safe be from this flood.

Then Noah with all his family shall make a sign as though
they wrought upon the ship with diverse instruments.

NOAH
Of this tree will I make the mast
tied with cables that will last,
and with a sail-yard for each blast,'

73-76 "And I will go gather mud to daub and smear the ship with pitch. Every inch of it must be anointed—the planks, the ribs, the pins." The gaps between the boards are made watertight with wet clay and sealed with a coat of pitch.

91 a sail-yard, i.e., the spar on which the sail is spread. The mast will later serve as a means of launching the birds; see 27b (50).

61 a pin - i.e., a wooden peg for securing the boards together. Nails are not used in the construction.
and each thing in their kind. | according to their function
With topcastle and bowsprit,' | appropriate
both cords and ropes I have all meet | rainsorm
95 to sail forth at the next weet. | complete
This ship is at an end.

Wife, in this vessel we shall be kept, | housed
my children and thou. I would in ye leapt.

NOAH’S In faith, Noah, I had as lief thou slept. | 
WIFE For all thy Frenish fare, | 
101 I will not do after thy read.* | 

NOAH Good wife, do now as I bid.

NOAH’S By Christ, not or I see more need, | before
though thou stand all day and stare. | 
WIFE | 

NOAH Lord, that women be crabbed ay,* | 
and none are meek, I dare well say. | 
That is well seen by me today in witness of you each one. | 
Good wife, let be all this bere | din
that thou makest in this place here, | believe
for all they ween that thou art master— | 
and so thou art, by St. John!

And after that God shall speak to Noah as followeth:

GOD Noah, take thou thy meny | household
and in the ship hie that ye be; | hasten
115 for none so righteous man to me is now on Earth living.

---

93 topcastle and bowsprit, i.e., a platform on the top of the mast and a spar jutting forward from the prow of the ship.

99-101 "Really, Noah, I’d rather you didn’t bother (‘slept’). In spite of all your Frenchified goings on, I won’t do what you suggest." The Wife pretends that Noah has been elaborately courteous.

105 "Lord, how ill-tempered women always are!"

117 clean beasts—the term relates to the Jewish dietary laws.
Have done, ye men and women all; stop
hie you lest this water fall, hurry
that each beast were in stall animal
and into the ship brought.
Of clean beasts seven shall be, near
of unclean, two; thus God bade me.
The flood is nigh, you may well see; therefore tarry you sought.

Then Noah shall go into the ark with all his family, his wife excepted, and the ark must be boarded round about. And on the boards all the beasts and fowls hereafter rehearsed must be painted, so that their words may agree with the pictures.

Sir, here are lions, leopards in; inside
horses, mares, oxen and swine; cattle
goats, calves, sheep and kine sit
here sitten, thou may see.

Camels, asses, man may find, all kinds of species
buck and doe, hart and hind. it seems to me
And beasts of all manner kind
here been, as thinketh me.

Take here cats and dogs, too, polecats
otters and foxes, fulmars also; cabbage
hares hopping gaily can go—here, have kale to eat!

And here are bears, wolves set; located
apes, owls, marmoset,
weasels, squirrels and ferret, eat their food
here they eaten their meat

Here are beasties in this house; animals
here cats maken it crouse; make it lively
here a ratten, here a mouse rat
that standen nigh together. stand close

And here are fowls less and more—birds
herons, cranes and bittore, bitterns
swans, peacocks—and them before in front of them
meat for this weather.

Here are cocks, kites, crows, species
rooks, ravens, many rows, ducks
ducks, curlewes. Whoever knows each one in his kind?

And here are doves, diggies, drakes, species
ducks running through the lakes—each fowl that ledden makes
and in this ship man may find.

Wife, come in. Why stands thou there? impudent
Thou art ever froward, that dare I swear. For fear lest we drown.

Come in—in God's half, time it were—" for fear lest we drown.
I will not out of this town.

But I have my gossips everyone, all my friends
one foot further I will not gone. if
They shall not drown, by Saint John, and if I may save their life.
They loved me well, by Christ. ship
But thou wilt let them into thy chest, wish
else row thou forth, Noah, when thou list, and get thee a new wife.

Shem, son, lo! Thy mother is wrow; angry
by God, such another I do not know.

Father, I shall fetch her in, I trow, trust
withouten any fail. for certain
Mother, my father after thee send sends
and bids thee into yonder ship wend.
go
Look up and see the wind, are
for we been ready to sail.

Son, go again to him and say
I will not come therein today.
NOAH

Come in, wife, in twenty devils’ way!
—or else stand there without.

HAM

Shall we all fetch her in?

NOAH

Yea, sons, in Christ’s blessing and mine!
I would ye hied you betime
mad haste; soon
for of this flood I stand in doubt.

GOOD

The flood comes fleeting in full fast,
flowing
on every side that spreadeth full far.

GOSSIP

For fear of drowning I am aghast;
good gossip, let us draw near.

227

And let us drink or we depart,
before
for oft-times we have done so.
For at one draught thou drinks a quart,
and so will I do or I go.

230

Here is a potte full of Malmsey’s
good and strong:
it will rejoice both heart and tongue.

JAPHET

Though Noah think us never so long,
yet we will drink aite.

235

Mother, we pray you all together—
children
for we are here, your own childer—

NOAH’S WIFE

That will I not for all your call,
screaming
but I have my gossips all.

NOAH

Aha, marry, this is hot!
violent
It is good to be still.

250

Ah, children, methink my boat removes,
is moving off
Our tarrying here me highly grieves.

Over the land the water spreads.

260

God do as he will.
may God do
Then they sing, and Noah shall speak again.

SHEM

In faith, mother, yet thou shall,
whether thou will or nought.

NOAH

Welcome, wife, into this boat.

NOAH’S WIFE

Have thou that for thy note!
reward
And she gives him a blow.

NOAH

Ah, great God, that art so good,
works; mad
now all this world is on a flood,
as I see well in sight.

255

This window I will shut anon,
at once
and into my chamber I will gone
till this water, so great won,

be slacked through thy might.

260

Then shall Noah shut the window of the ark and for a little
space within the boards they shall sing the psalm “Save me, O
God”; and afterward opening the window and looking round
about, saying:

Now forty days are fully gone.

Send a raven I will anon,
at once

224+SH The 1592 manuscript here reads “The Good Gossip’s Song.” It is not
clear whether all or part of what follows constitutes a song, or if the reference is
a cue for a song which is not specified but is sung by the Gossip as they
approach. 227 indicates that, despite the plural heading, only one Gossip is
speaking at the start, apparently to a second (228). Any song was surely a
drinking song, and hence an effective contrast to the sacred song specified for
Noah and his family in the 1607 manuscript at 260+SD (see note).

233 Malmsey A very sweet Madeira wine.

235 “Though Noah may think we’re taking ever such a long time.”

260+SD The direction here is supplied from the 1607 manuscript. That in the 1591
manuscript reads: “Then shall Noah shut the window of the ark and for a little
space within the boards he shall be silent; and afterwards opening the window
suggests that “Save me, O God” cues a metrical version of Psalm 69—probably
that by John Hopkins in the psalter of Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins,
popular in the later sixteenth century.
if ought-where earth, tree or stone
be dry in any place.
And if this fowl come not again,
it is a sign, sooth to sayn,
that dry it is on hill or plain,
and God hath done some grace.

Then he shall send a raven, and taking a dove in his hands,
shall say:

Ah, Lord, wherever this raven be?
Somewhere is dry, well I see!
But yet a dove, by my lewty,
after I will send.
Thou wilt turn again to me, for of all fowls that may fly
thou art most meek and hond.

Then he shall send forth a dove; and there shall be in the ship
another dove carrying an olive-branch in its beak, which
someone shall send from the nest by a rope into Noah’s
hands; and then Noah shall say:

Ah, Lord, blessed be thou ay,
that me hast comfort thus today.
By this sight I may well say
this flood begins to cease.

My sweet dove to me brought has
a branch of olive from some place.
This betokeneth God has done us some grace,
and is a sign of peace.

Ah, Lord, honoured must thou be;
all Earth dries now I see.
But yet till thou command me,
hence will I not hie.
All this water is away.
Therefore, as soon as I may,
sacrifice I shall do in fay
to thee devoutly.

GOD
Noah, take thy wife anon,
and thy children every one;
out of the ship thou shalt gone,

and they all with thee.
Beasts and all that can fly,
on Earth to grow and multiply.
I will that it so be.

NOAH
Lord, I thank thee through thy might;
thy bidding shall be done in hight.
And, as fast as I may dight,
I will do thee honour
and to thee offer sacrifice.
Therefore comes in all wise,*
for of these beasts that been his
offer I will this stour.

Then, leading forth from the ark with his whole family, he
shall take his animals and birds and offer them and slay them.

NOAH
Lord God in majesty
that such grace hast granted me
where all was lorn, safe to be!
Therefore now I am boun—
my wife, my children, and my meny—
with sacrifice to honour thee
of beasts, fowls, as thou mayest see,
and full devotion.

GOD
Noah, to me thou art full able
and thy sacrifice acceptable;
for I have found thee true and stable,
on thee must I min.
Warry Earth I will no more
for Man’s sins that grieves me sore;
for of youth Man full yore
has been inclined to sin.

Ye shall now grow and multiply,
and Earth again to edify.
Each beast, and fowl that may fly,
shall be feared of you.
And fish in sea, all that may flet,

305 “Therefore come, everyone.”
shall sustain you, I thee behet; to eat of them ye ne let that clean been, you mon know.

Thereas ye have eaten before trees and roots since ye were bore, of clean beasts now, less and more, I give you leave to eat— save blood and flesh both in fere of wrong dead carrion that is here. Eat not of that in no manner, for that ay ye shall let.

Manslaughter also ay ye shall flee, for that is not pleasant unto me. They that shedden blood, he or she, ought-where amongst mankin, that blood foul shed shall be and vengeance have, men shall see. Therefore beware now all ye, you fall not into that sin.

And forward, Noah, with thee I make and all thy seed for thy sake, of such vengeance for to slake, for now I have my will. Here I behet thee an hest, that man, woman, lowl ne beast with water while this world shall last I will no more spill.

My bow between you and me in the firmament shall be, by verray tokening that you may see that such vengeance shall cease, that man ne woman shall never more be wasted by water as hath before; but for sin that grieveth me sore

Therefore this vengeance was.

Where clouds in the welkin been, that ilk bow shall be seen, in tokening that my wrath and teen shall never thusroken be. The string is turned towards you and towards me is bent the bow, that such weather shall never show; and this behet I thee.

My blessing now I give thee here, to thee, Noah, my servant dear, for vengeance shall no more appear. And now farewell, my darling dear.

THE END

336-37 "Except the flesh and blood both together of the corpses that are here, which have not been killed by the permitted means." The reference seems unlikely to be to the sacrificial beasts; possibly it refers to animals destroyed in the flood.