Christ and the Leper from the Chester Cycle\(^1\)
(ca. 1531–75)

Contributed by Kurt Schreyer

Introduction

In the 1979 film *Life of Brian*, a Monty Python satire about a mistaken messiah, the eponymous Brian meets an ex-leper who, though a skilled haggler, is not only miffed about the fact that Jesus cured him but also begrudges acts of generosity in general. The scene’s punchline—"There’s no pleasing some people."—goes beyond comedy to raise provocative questions about the public ministry of Jesus, above all whether those people he cured became grateful followers and what kind of lives they led following their miraculous healing.

The Chester craft guild of Cordwainers, or Shoemakers, explore these challenging issues in Play 14 as Jesus, who is on his way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and to undergo betrayal, torture, and crucifixion, dines at the house of Simon the Leper—or rather ex-leper whom he “healed hase / over all for to showe” who once “that fowle and mesell was” (ll. 19–20, 18). According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, “mesell” was one of the English words (besides “lazar” and “leper”) commonly used from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century to describe persons “afflicted with any of various disfiguring skin diseases, such as leucoderma, psoriasis, vitiligo, etc.” though of course the term carried moral implications as well, being applied to “lowly wretched” people or “sinners,” or even of “diseased or infected” swine. Though potentially debilitating, medical practitioners and laypeople alike knew that incipient *lepra* or other disfiguring skin conditions might be cured, whether through the temporary remission of the disease, successful treatments, or perhaps by some miraculous means. It was by no means uncommon to know someone “that fowle and mesell was” (l. 18) but who, like Simon, was restored to society after their physical suffering and, perhaps, the public ignominy of segregation.

The Scriptures do not record the healing of Simon *per se*, and the play draws from scenes in all four Gospels whose details are vexingly interchanged but which are similar in one respect: Simon the Leper never speaks.\(^2\) In the Chester play, however, after initially expressing his warm gratitude to Jesus for curing him, he subsequently begrudges Maria Magdalena’s anointing of Jesus’ head and feet. Worse, he wishes to segregate her from society as if she were a leper: “hee should…suffer her not to come him nere” (ll. 62–63). Simon confides these thoughts to a likeminded Judas, whose greed and duplicity will become apparent later in the play. Before addressing the penitent Magdalen, Jesus reprimands both men. In this way, the play works to more closely juxtapose Simon the former leper with Judas the future betrayer.

The play clearly examines the intimate connections between bodily disease and moral depravity, but it does not oversimplify what would have been considered to be a complex relationship. For one thing, Simon was not merely leprous but, as he explicitly states, Jesus cured him of a great many physical and spiritual perils: “Well is me that I may see thy face / here in my house, this poore place./
Thou comfortes me in manye a case / and that I full well knowe” (ll. 21–24).

Simon's spiritual recovery is still a work in progress, and Jesus commends his reply to the parable of the two debtors (ll. 80–112). Humble and gracious as he speaks to Jesus, he is nonetheless self-regarding and judgmental toward the unhappy woman: “Methinke that hee should lett her goo, / tis woman full of synne and woe, / for feare of worldes shame” (ll. 58–60). What Simon has forgotten (or wishes to forget) but which would have been plain to a late-medieval audience, is that leprosy, prostitution, and sexual incontinence were culturally perceived to be related and mutually sustaining. Pointing his finger at Magdalen's disreputable past, he unwittingly raises the specter of his own former life. We would be accurate in saying that the play associates Simon's leprosy with Maria's promiscuity as well as Judas' treachery, but such observations need to be carefully circumscribed, for it does not do so from any sense of moral superiority or a desire to condemn lepers. Quite the opposite is true: the Cordwainer's play seems to find more danger in being an ex-leper than in suffering from leprosy itself. Like the preceding Cure of the Blind Man, this play is much more interested in social wholeness and the integration of those who have been physically and morally excluded than in division and separation.

For whatever his expressed gratitude toward Jesus, Simon's lack of hospitality resembles the social ostracizing which lepers often (though not quite so often as we may think, as Carole Rawcliffe demonstrates) experienced. Keeping his distance from his guest, he treats Jesus as if he too suffered from leprosy: “Kisse syth I came thou gave non,... / With oyle thou hast not me anoynt” (ll. 105, 109). The play does not give Simon a chance to reply to Jesus' reproach, and we're left to wonder if he is cured of his spiritual pride. What we can say is that he is present to hear Maria Magdalena use the same word—“fowle” (i.e., foul)—to portray her former sinful life which Simon had used to describe his leprosy. In her final words to Jesus she says: “thou hast... from fowle life unto great lee [tranquility] / releeved me, lord, for love” (ll. 134–36). Hearing these words, Jesus immediately leaves Simon's house and enters Jerusalem to begin his Passion—“for love.”

Bibliography


JESUS Brethren, goe we to Bethenye to Lazarre, Martha, and Marye; for I love mych that companye, thidder now I wend.° Symon the lepper hath prayed° me in his house to take charitie.° With them nowe yt liketh mee a while for to lend.°

PETRUS Lord, all readye shall we be in life and death to goe with thee. Great joye they may have to see thy comminge into there° place.

PHILIPPUS Lazarre thou raysed through thy pitty, and Simon also—mesell° was hee—thou clensed,° lord, that wotten° we, and holpe° them through thy grace. °Tunc ibunt versus domum Simonis leprosi.°

SIMON Welcome, Jesu, full of grace, that mee that fowle° and mesell was all whole, lord, thou healed hase,° over all for to showe.°

Well is me that I may see thy face here in my house, this poore place. Thou comfortes me in manye a case° and that I full well knowe.

LAZARUS Welcome, lord, sweete Jesu. Blessed be the tyme that I thee knewe. From death to life through thy vertue° thou raysed me not yore.° Fowre dayes in yearth° when I had layne thou grantest me life, lord, agayne. Thee I honour with all my mayne° nowe and evermore.

MARTHA Welcome, my lovely lord and leere;° welcome, my deareworth° darlinge deare. Fayne° may thy freindes be in feere°
to se thy freelye° face.
Syttes downe, if your will weare,°
and I shall helpe to serve you here
before in other place.

Tunc Jesus sedebat, et omnes cum eo, et
veniet Maria Magdalena cum alabastro unguenti, et lamentando dicat.°

MARIA MAGDALENA Welcome, my
lovely lord of leale;°
welcome, my harte; welcome, my heale;°
welcome, all my worldes weale,°
my boote° and all my blys.
From thee, lord, may I not conceale
my fylth and my faultes fayle.°
Forgive mee that my flesh so frayle
to thee hath done amysse.°
Oyntment I have here readye
to anoynte thy sweete bodye.

Though I be wretched and unworthye,
wayve° me not from thy wonne.°

JESUS Simon, take good heed to mee.
SIMON Maister, what you° will bee,
saye on, I you beseech.

JESUS By an example I shall thee showe
and to this companye on a rowe,°
whereby I say thou may knowe
to answere° to my speache.

Two detters somtyme° there were
oughten° money to a userer.°
The on° was in his dangere°
five hundreth penyes tould;°
They° other fiftie, as I saye here.
For they were poore, at there° prayer
he forgave them both in feare,°
and nought take of them he would.
Whether° of these two, read° if thou
can,
was more behoulden° to that man?

SIMON Lord, as much as I can thereon
I shall saye or I passe.°
Five hundreth is more then fiftie;
therfore methinke skylfullye°

freelye noble if..weare if you wish womte accustomed Tunc Jesus...dicat Jesus then sits down
and the others with him. Mary Magdalen enters with a jar of ointment and, weeping mournfully, she says
[Latin] leale faithful people heale health worldes weale world's prosperity boote redeemer faultes fayle many faults amysse amiss wayve send away womne dwelling monne monn Tunc aperiet pixedem, et faciet signum
unctionis, et rigabit pedes Jesu lachrymis et tergebit capillis suis.°
SIMON A, Judas, why doth Jesus soe?
JUDAS ISCARIOTH Nay, Simon,
brother, sooth to saye,
this oyntment goeth to° fast awaye
that is so much of pryce.

This ylke boyst° might have binne sould
for three hundreth penyes tould°
and dealt to poore men, whosoever
would,
and whosoever had binne wise.

JESUS Simon, take good heed to mee.
I have an errand° to saye to thee.

JESUS By an example I shall thee showe
and to this companye on a rowe,°
whereby I say thou may knowe
to answere° to my speache.

Two detters somtyme° there were
oughten° money to a userer.°
The on° was in his dangere°
five hundreth penyes tould;°
They° other fiftie, as I saye here.
For they were poore, at there° prayer
he forgave them both in feare,°
and nought take of them he would.
Whether° of these two, read° if thou
can,
was more behoulden° to that man?

SIMON Lord, as much as I can thereon
I shall saye or I passe.°
Five hundreth is more then fiftie;
therfore methinke skylfullye°
that hee that hee forgave more partic, more houlden to him he was.

JESUS Simon, thou deemes soothlie, iwyssse. Sees thoo this woman that here is? Sycker she hath not donne amysse to worke on this manere. Into thy house here thou me geete; no water thou gave mee to my feete. Shee washed them with her teares and wyped them with her heare. Kiss syth I came thou gave non, but syth shee came into this wonne shee hath kyssed my feete eychon; of weeping shee never ceased. With oyle thou hast not me anoynt, but shee hat donne both foot and joynt. Therfore I tell thee on poynyt, mych synne is her released. 

Ad Judam Iscarioth:

And Judas, also to thee I saye: wherto wouldest thee mispaye with this woman by any waye that eased me this hasse? A good deed she hath donne todaye, for poore men you have with you aye, and me yee may not have, in faye, but a little space. Therfore, woman, witterly, for thou hast loved so tenderly, all thy synnes nowe forgive I; beleeffe hath saved thee. And all that preach the evangelye through the world by and by of thy deed shall make memorye that thou hasse donne to mee.

MARIA MAGDALENA My Christ, my comfort and my kinge, I worshippe thee in all thinge, for nowe my hart is in likinge, and I at myne above. Seaven devils nowe, as I well see, thou hast dryven nowe owt of mee, and from fowle life unto great lee releived me, lord, for love.
Endnotes

1 The text for this scene from Play 14 performed by the Chester Cordwainers, or Shoemakers, is based on Hermann Deimling and G.W. Matthews, eds., The Chester Plays, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 62 and 115 (Oxford University Press, 1892 and 1916), in consultation with the work of Robert M. Lumiansky and David Mills, The Chester Mystery Cycle, Early English Text Society Supplementary Series 3 (Oxford University Press, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 230–42, and Robert M. Lumiansky, ed., The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents (University of North Carolina Press, 1983). While the author(s) of the Cordwainers’ play and the date of its origin are not known, this particular scene at the house of Simon the Leper was probably an embellishment of an older pageant depicting Christ’s entry into Jerusalem and confrontation with the moneylenders in the Temple. And while surviving records demonstrate the Cordwainers’ expenditures for a similar version of the play in 1550, it is reasonable to suppose that this episode was added much earlier when the cycle expanded to a three-day production during Whitsun week sometime around 1531 and then underwent several changes and evolutions in the ensuing decades before the final performance of the cycle during Midsummer 1575. Footnotes and endnotes have been provided by Kurt Schreyer. Stanza breaks have been removed for ease of publication.

2 Yet in Luke’s account of the anointing by the sinful woman, Simon the Pharisee, who has not apparently been healed by Jesus, does (see Lk 7:36–50).