

Accusation, Co-Inherence, and the Cross in Charles Williams' *Judgement at Chelmsford*

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."--I Corinthians 15:20-22

Structure

John Heath-Stubbs' edition of Williams' *Collected Plays* includes Williams' synopsis of *Judgement at Chelmsford*, so there's no real need to summarize the action of the various segments of his pageant-play. However, it might be useful to consider how the unfolding events, which function as one-part court case prosecution and one-part lesson in local church history, also function together as what Williams calls "the movement of the soul of man in its journey from the things of this world to the heavenly city of the Almighty God" (63).

The structure of the pageant moves from the increasing damning evidence brought by the Accuser with a brief, though morally mixed, respite with the example of the Christmas feast and play at the abbey to the answer to Chelmsford's shame in the example of the martyrs to the message and way of the Cross which overcomes all her sins and restores her to right standing in God.

Prologue- "Good. I will show you her soul. /Show; show; show; show; show!"

First Episode (Modern Times)—"I see I am poorer than I thought."

Second Episode (The Chelmsford Witches)—"Sir, it is a holy thing to seek after evil that other folk commit—but, sir, it needs money."

Third Episode (The Reformation)—"for it is my will always to bring a good thing out of iniquity"

Fourth Episode (Barking Abbey)—"If piety can't act, Father, piety ought not to be in a play."

Fifth Episode (John Ball and the Peasants' Uprising)—
"Man finds the doctrine of exchange hard and strange."

Sixth Episode (Martyrdom of St. Osyth)—"His name is Now. Now!"

Seventh Episode (Old King Cole)—"Love is our first child; if we have a second, I dedicate him to this hour."

Eighth Episode (St. Helena and the Invention of the Cross)—"But find you the Cross within you, as that blessed Empress also did, and you shall find Christ himself, Christ that is the Cross . . ."

Epilogue—"Sweet lady, this is the answer to all./ Fair daughter, this is the truth of all."

Thematic Materials

1. The nature of effective and aesthetically powerfully religious drama.

“Propaganda does not destroy art; missionary plays (with whatever mission) can yet be well written and effective. But there is a condition, and it is that the design must not be imposed from without. The propaganda must be the inevitable result of the art. . . . Religious drama then must create its excitement from within. . . . religious drama has a right to as much tolerance as is given to the secular. It has a right to *attention*, and attention to what it is actually doing and saying, and not to what some goop [polite infant] thinks his great-grandmother said and did.”—“Religious Drama” (1938)

2. Is there anything like natural goodness in the human world?

Nature and grace are categories of one Identity. . . . Union with our sacred Lord is obtained by acts. Belief is, no doubt, an act; proper motive is an act; but also an act is an act. The great doctrines are the only explanation and the only hope. But even the great doctrines are only the statement of something as wide as the universe and as deep as the human heart. . . . It is to be believed that, except by the cross and resurrection, no act is valid; and that by the cross and resurrection the proper validity of every act is determined. . . . The Incarnation of the Son of God led to the cross because it summed up and prevented the otherwise inevitable end of human process both individual and general.-- “Natural Goodness” (1941)

3. What makes death an outrage is its dividing of the body and spirit.

Some such idea, Wordsworth’s lines suggest, the body and even the members of the body may give of the delight, grace, honor, power, and worthiness of man’s structure. The structure of the body is an index to the structure of a greater whole. . . . But I hope it is not unorthodox to say that body and soul are one identity, and that all our inevitable but unfortunate verbal distinctions are therefore something less than true. Death has been regarded by the Christian church as an outrage—a necessary outrage, perhaps, but still an outrage. It has been held to be an improper and grotesque schism in a single identity—to which submission, but not consent, is to be offered; a think, like sin, that ought not to be and yet is. -- “The Index of the Body” (1942)

4. Forgiveness is a principle in the universe; without, we are lost.

Yet if there is one thing which is obviously either a part of the universe or not—and on knowing whether it is or not our life depends—it is the forgiveness of sins. Our life depends on it in every sense. . . . Forgiveness, if it is at all a principle of that interchanged life, is certainly the deepest of all; if it is not, then the whole principle of interchange is false. If the principle of retributive justice is our only hope we had certainly better know it. Because then, since retributive justice strictly existing everywhere is staringly impossible, all our hopes of interchange and union, of all kinds, are ended at once; and we had better know *that*. . . . It is not, however, in this human discussion of the possibilities of forgiveness that the dark terror lies. We can happily universalize our individual experiences into theories there without feeling much horror, though not perhaps without feeling much horror, though not perhaps without doing some harm. The fear is in making statements about God. --*The Forgiveness of Sins* (1942)

5. Largess begins in the central ability to forgive and be forgiven.

The restoration of normal relations, which is so often included in it, does not strictly belong to it at all. Before that pure restoration can take place, there must be not only a remission of debt but a communication of validity. . . . that validity operates in the community, in the church, in the mystical

body which rose, new-blooded, from the shed blood. "Only in the community can 'the individual' gain his individuality." "Sanctification" is that state in which "reconciliation and fellowship find their goal and consummation"; it is this which is, to raise to its full meaning a term otherwise applied, "the doctrine of largesse." . . . The operation which begins with the first kiss of pardon is not complete until all fibers of the being, physical and spiritual, are charged with that doctrine; and it is a doctrine of taking as well as of giving. It is easier often to forgive than to be forgiven; yet it is fatal to be willing to be forgiven by God and to be reluctant to be forgiven by men. To forgive and to be forgiven are the two points of holy magnificence and holy modesty; round these two centers the whole doctrine of largesse revolves. --"The Doctrine of Largesse" (1941)

6. The Cross of Christ is the substitution, the exchange, and the reconciliation of us all.

We may believe he was generous if we know that he was just. By that central substitution, which was the thing added by the cross to the Incarnation, he became everywhere the center of, and everywhere he energized and reaffirmed, all our substitutions and exchanges. . . . Our salvation is precisely our reconciliation, to nature and to the church-not that they are so separate; our reconciliation both to him and to our present state, both at once and both in one. --"The Cross" (1943)

7. We must bear one another's burdens because we are essential part of one another.

The Christian idea was expressed in the phrase "bear ye one another's burdens." It encouraged, indeed it demanded, a continual attention to the needs of one's neighbor, to his distresses and his delights. And it defined "neighbor" as meaning anyone with whom one was, by holy Luck, brought into contact. It required then, an active "sympathy," and it spoke of something still higher, of an active and non-selfish love. It went even farther. It declared a union of existences. It proclaimed that our own lives depended on the lives of our neighbors. Saint Anthony of Egypt laid down the doctrine in so many words: 'Your life and your death are with your neighbor.'" --*The Way of Exchange* (1941)