FROM THE OLD LAW TO THE NEW:
The Brussels *Eerste Bliscap van Maria*

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For over a century (probably from the 1440s until the 1560s) the Grote Markt or Grande Place in Brussels was the scene of an annual performance of plays depicting the Seven Joys of Mary, taking place in a sequence of seven plays, one each year.

From at least 1448, these performances were subsidised and supported by the city authorities. The plays themselves began as in effect an extended companion piece to the annual *ommegang* or formal procession in honour of the Virgin Mary, which dates from the mid–fourteenth century. Both the *ommegang* and in due course the cycle of Mary plays owed their existence and their regular continuing performance to the foremost Brussels *Schuttersgilde* or 'shooting guild', known as the Grote Gulde. It was only in the last few years of the cycle's performing life that this by then ancient guild appealed for assistance in mounting the plays to the more recently formed Chambers of Rhetoric. Of this cycle of seven plays, only two survive, the first and the last in the sequence, *De Eerste Bliscap van Maria* and *Die Sevenste Bliscap van Onser Vrouwen*.[1]

The Epilogue of the *Sevenste Bliscap* looks back in summary form over the whole cycle, noting that

> Dierst was: hoe God liet neder dalen
> Gabriel, mit reynen gedachte,
> Om ons te lossene uter qualen,
> Die haer de salige bootschap brachte 1701–4
>
> 'The first [play] was: how God out of his unblemished sense of purpose sent down Gabriel, to release us from our sufferings — Gabriel who brought her the blessed message'.

This summary is of course accurate up to a point, in reminding the audience that the first episode in the cycle, played six years previously and to be repeated in the following year, was that of the Annunciation. On the other hand, in the play of the *Eerste Bliscap* Mary herself is not mentioned until line 1633 (out of 2081), and the Annunciation proper begins at line 2012. By contrast, the entire action of the *Sevenste Bliscap* is explicitly

concerned with the approaching Death and Assumption of the Virgin; as the Prologue puts it, it deals with

> Wat vrouden Maria heeft ontfaen
> Doen hier haer leven wert gedaen. 49–50

'What joys Mary received when her life here was over'.

So what is happening in the *Eerste Bliscap*, and why? What kind of play is this? In particular, what kind of narrative or thematic thread, if any, leads us to the culminating episode of the Annunciation, and what connection, if any, is provided to the six following plays in the cycle? To begin with, the *Eerste Bliscap* is clearly not simply a miracle or saint's play: the 37–line scene of the Annunciation at the end of the play is the culmination of a sequence of episodes which I intend to show is carefully argued, judiciously selected, and strikingly stageworthy. The two thousand lines of 'preparation' that make up the bulk of the play may be understood as an introduction to and contextualisation of the whole cycle of seven. The author and his promoters were not content simply to tell the first episode in the story of Mary — it was desirable that audiences have explained to them why this story was important at all, and to this end this first play of the cycle recapitulates in a particularly focused form the spiritual history of the human race. In this broad structural aspect, the *Eerste Bliscap* may be thought of, as several scholars have pointed out, as a cycle play; in a broadly similar way, the English cycles centre on episodes from the life of Christ but require that those events be situated in the whole history of the world in order to make clear the necessity of his life and death. From another point of view, the *Eerste Bliscap* may be seen as an extended morality on guilt, judgment, and mercy, in which for much of the time Adam represents the 'Mankind' figure, and in which the language and settings of courts of law play a defining and integrating rôle. There is no element in the *Eerste Bliscap* that cannot be found elsewhere, either separately or in clusters (apart, that is, from the short scene of the gossiping neighbours of Joachim and Anna: 1546–71), but it is the particular choice, arrangement, and emphasis of those elements in a coherent overall structure that gives this piece its special quality. Let us examine this construction more closely.

The speaker of the Prologue undertakes that they will

> Figuerlic speelwijs doen besceet
> Die eerste bliscap die haer bescye 35–6

> 'show by means of figures, in the form of a play, the first joy that happened to [Mary]';

this is a confident statement of theatrical conventionality, an awareness of which the author expects his audience to share. *Elckerlijck* and *Everyman* use much the same terms in their prologues fifty years later. The Prologue of the *Eerste Bliscap* goes on to explain, in effect, why the Annunciation itself takes up so little space in the play:

> Al es de boetscap tprincipale
> Ons speels, tes noot datmen verhale
> Waer omme dat God, te onsen behouwe,
> Menselicheit aen nemen wouwe. 45–8

> 'Even though the message [of the Annunciation] is the main point, it is necessary that we explain why God, for our salvation, wished to take on human form'.

With such a broadly expressed programme, one might expect this play to begin with the Creation, like the English cycle plays, but this is not the case, and the starting point chosen by this playwright is the first pointer to the very particular and deliberate emphasis that gives shape to the whole play. Omitting the Creation scenes and Lucifer's Fall, the dramatic action begins with the despair and envy of the Fallen Angels, which is the proximate beginning of the train of events that will lead to the Fall of Adam and Eve, the debates surrounding the consequences of that Fall, and the decision that the Son of God will be born to Mary as a human being.

This scene is further refined — both theatrically and conceptually — by being limited to two characters, Lucifer himself and Envy, who is thought of both as a devil and as the traditional representation of Invidia, a woman whose teeth are worn out from eating her own hands and who is *dwinende / Tot eender scaduwen* ('fading away to a shadow': 115–16). Envy here represents that aspect of the Devil that most provoked him to his rash ambition, and who at this point, as a dramatic character, urges him to take revenge on mankind, now occupying the place from which the Fallen Angels have been expelled.

It is therefore Envy, not Lucifer, who approaches the Serpent, who in turn approaches Eve, who persuades Adam, in a succinctly presented set of domino effects. At this point God intervenes:

> Ic, die ben ende hebbe ghemaect
> Alle dinc ende van nieute onstaect

Ende op rechtverdicheit gescepen,
Ben nu bi redenen in dien begrepen,
Dat ic justicie sal doen baren
Op hen, die overhorich waren
Mijns geboots, reyn int behagen.
Dies selen sire penitencie om verdragen
Soe lange, als recht met redenen brieft. 258–66

'I who am, and who have made everything out of nothing,
and founded it on righteousness, have quite reasonably
decided to carry out justice on those who have disobeyed my
entirely pleasing commandment. Therefore they will suffer
their punishment as long as right/law reasonably requires'.

The collocation of the words *rechtverdicheit*, *justicie*, and *recht* in this passage emphatically establishes that God's law cannot but be just, both because it is divine and because it is reasonable, and this grouping of concepts also sets the framework of discourse and imagery which forms, as we shall see, the connecting thread of the play.

After God's regretful but consistent sentence of banishment, Adam and Eve are escorted by the 'angel Cherubin' with his sword, who, according to the stage directions, remains onstage as a silent presence until the death of Adam, 630 lines later. Adam fully recognises the justice of the judgment, and his own guilt:

In weelden haddi u mogen houwen
Daer ghi nu ellindich blijft.
Die duecht wilt lonen met ontrouwen,
Hets redelic hijs druc bedrijft 347–50

'You might have stayed in bliss, where now you are in
misery; he who repays kindness with betrayal, it's reasonable
that he should suffer sorrow for it'.

Lucifer, on the other hand, is about to leap out of his skin *van bliscepen* (with joy: 406) — ironically, the first use of the word since the Prologue. A large part of the devils' glee is that they believe that they now have God trapped by His own unshakeable sense of justice, and that therefore the source of their own pain will become the means to their revenge. They proceed to lay a formal charge against Adam and Eve, and Lucifer, like an unctuous prosecutor, addresses God in His judgement seat as *alder rechtuerdichste rechter* ('most just Judge of all': 497) and *rechter goet* ('good

Judge': 505), and he demands their souls, supported by Envy, who points out that this would be only reasonable (510), as Adam and Eve freely made their choice, just as they themselves had. Adam admits guilt but asks for mercy, especially for his descendants, saying that it seems *geen gerechtichede* ('no justice': 547) that they too should be punished. Envy's summing–up, however — *Bi redenen, ende dies versuechic recht* ('By reason, and therefore I ask for justice': 569) — leaves God no exit, and he regretfully pronounces that

> Rechts soe salic mi moeten bewinden.
> Want na dat redene en recht vermach,
> En condier geen onscout vinden. 572–4
>
> 'I shall have to carry out the law, because by reason and right/law you could find no basis for acquitting them'.

The conceptual driving force of the play is becoming clear. Just as Milton in his great poetic epic sets out 'To justify the ways of God to man' through argument and narration, so the author of the *Eerste Bliscap* is deliberately and coherently laying out all the arguments of the Old Law, and choosing particular actions, settings, and language in order to express them and their consequences in dramatic terms. These issues are of course not in themselves novel or different, but in this play they are presented with exceptional sharpness, consistency, and dramatic judgment. The triumphant threats of Lucifer, who has now won his case, are followed by the terrifying racket of the devils offstage, and then, after a brief pause, we move on to Adam in extreme old age (930 years old).

The dramatic action is punctuated in this way by seventeen explicit indications of pauses, sometimes with music or other noises; these pauses signal significant changes in either time or place, or both. Next, Seth, the son of Adam, goes to find the Angel guarding Paradise (you will remember that this Angel has been on stage since the Expulsion, playing, in effect, the role of a silent court orderly during the arguments before God that have — in theatrical terms — just been concluded; this contrast between stage time and Adam's time — a few minutes to the audience, 900 years to Adam — reminds us of the coexistence of God's timelessness and human time through 'history'). Seth asks whether there is a cure for his father's sickness, and, in accordance with one common version of the story developing from the *Legenda Aurea*, the Angel gives him a branch of the Paradise tree, which is to be planted under the head of Adam, who has now died.

Lucifer and Envy celebrate and gloat, and then we hear the groans and cries of the Fathers, represented here by David, Job, Isaiah, and one other. It is five thousand years later, and they are trapped in what Eve refers to as *desen Kerkere* ('this prison': 794). As the Fathers cry out, Adam appeals for their release to *alder rechtuerdichste rechter verheven* ('the most just Judge of all, on high': 771), thus directly echoing the opening words of Lucifer's address at the beginning of Adam and Eve's trial, and thereby emphasising the contrast between Lucifer's hypocrisy and vindictiveness and Adam's love and concern for his descendants.

The dramatic action moves easily from one figurative level to another: from Lucifer and Envy to Adam and Eve and the Fathers (in explicitly noted historical time) and now to allegorical representation: Bitter Sorrow (*Bitter Ellende*) appears on stage, on crutches, and in wretched clothes. She is a physical/theatrical embodiment of the spiritual suffering of the Fathers, while her friend Heartfelt Prayer (*Innich Gebet*), who enters shortly after her, represents through her movement and actions on stage the dynamic force within the Fathers that will lead to their liberation. On hearing the appeal of Bitter Sorrow, Heartfelt Prayer produces a drill and bores a hole in *den hemel* ('heaven': 916–7), moves up through it, and then calls up Mercy (*Ontfermicheit*), who dwells in God's heart (964). Mercy needs to be called on as an intercessor because God is still so offended by the actions of fallen humans — after all, five thousand years is meaningless to Him — that their sorrows and prayers, no matter how heartfelt, are not sufficient. The severity of the offence and the just and righteous anger of God are, as we have already seen, constantly noted — this very particular emphasis is leading up to the presentation of Mary's necessary double role, both as mother of the Saviour and as intercessor in her own right on the basis of the New Law. Mercy, therefore, through the action of Heartfelt Prayer, who in turn represents Adam and Eve and the virtuous Fathers, becomes their *advocaet* (958), thus leading to the next scene, the debate in Heaven, presented as a vigorous argument about law and the limits of law.

The other three Daughters of God are introduced one by one, each at a point in the debate that is appropriate to her individual nature. Justice, who claims also to live in God's heart, is the first to engage with Mercy, using a distinctively aggressive tone. Their interchange makes explicit the central problem and paradox of the play's action: on the one hand, if Adam and his descendants do not suffer eternal death, justice will not be eternal and God's truth will fail; on the other hand, God created Adam to

fill Lucifer's place and enjoy the sight of God, and if he does not do so, God's will will fail.

The two sisters are deadlocked at this point, with Justice going by the statutes and Mercy suggesting that God can look further than that, when Truth intervenes in an attempt to mediate, suggesting that they find someone sinless who will pay on behalf of humankind.

After they have fruitlessly tried the angels, God asks His Son for advice; the Son, not wanting to step outside the framework of law on His own account, responds cautiously that, if God wills it, Justice and Truth's opinion should be asked, while the Holy Spirit appeals to God to settle the matter as He thinks fit. We appear to be back in the deadlock at this point, but then Peace speaks up for the first time, reminding the Father that *Ghi sijt genadich in allen keere* ('You are merciful in every respect': 1235).

This is of course the turning–point in the debate and in the play. After Son and Daughters have asked some clarifying questions, the Son accepts his new rôle, in a speech from which questions of law are now entirely absent. The discourse of law, with its accompanying stage–images of court, accused, judge, advocates, and prison, gives way to the discourse of love, with its utopian images of light, fruitfulness, and motherhood. Time and timelessness (or history and eternity) will be reconciled when Mary receives the message that she will bear the Son of God in human form.

We may obtain some illuminating insights into this author's dramaturgical practice by comparing this version of the debate in Heaven with that in the English *Castle of Perseverance*. This episode in the *Castle* is 466 lines long, and the speeches are distributed as follows: in the *Castle*, there are sixteen speeches, with Mercy and Truth having four speeches each (totalling 122 and 102 lines respectively), Justice and Peace three each (111 and 112 lines), and God one speech (19 lines); in the *Eerste Bliscap*, there are 440 lines in this scene, distributed among fifty speeches, with Mercy having fifteen speeches (140 lines), Justice thirteen (103 lines), Truth ten (84.5 lines), Peace two (6 lines), God the Father five (58.5 lines), the Son three (27 lines), the Holy Spirit one (8 lines) and an angel one (12 lines).

The debate in Heaven in the *Eerste Bliscap* is therefore twenty–six lines shorter than that in the *Castle*, but is made up of three times as many individual speeches. The tone of this episode in the *Castle* is leisurely and dignified, with frequent Latin citations from Scripture; Mercy is somewhat more prominent than her sisters. In the *Eerste Bliscap* version, the language tends to be more colloquial at times, especially in the exchanges between Mercy and Justice; the speeches are much less evenly distributed,

with Mercy and Justice leading the debate, consistently with the central emphasis of the play, while Peace makes two brief but crucial interventions; no speech is longer than twenty lines, which greatly increases the sense of urgency and the dramatic vigour of the debate; God the Father plays a more active role in questioning and commenting, while the plea to the angels (not in the *Castle*), which is met by an explicitly noted silence, also increases the dramatic tension.

This confident assimilation and adaptation of a wellknown episode or topos is a striking but typical example of the dramaturgical skill of the writer of the *Bliscap* plays. After Mercy, Justice, and Truth have recited a finely constructed triple rondel to conclude the scene in Heaven, Joachim appears, and from this point on we are in recognisably human time and space. After Joachim's brutal ejection from the temple, God sends an angel to tell him that his wife's barrenness is at an end. The images now are of trees, flowers, fruit, and fountains.

A brief and original scene of two curious but sympathetic neighbours emphasises the familiar human context, after which we move quickly to the birth of Mary. The regular episodes follow, in a brief but coherent form that is stripped of any elements — such as dwelling on Joseph's age or on his doubts about Mary's faithfulness — which might detract from the forward movement of the argument. At the age of three, Mary is sent — with her agreement — to live in the Temple. In the following scene she is old enough to marry; three young wooers and Joseph come with dry branches, as instructed by the angel, and Joseph's produces a flower; they marry, and God prepares Gabriel for his mission. There follow the thirty-seven lines of the Annunciation scene, and then the Epilogue, in which the speaker promises that the plays of the six other Joys will follow, year by year.

If we step back and observe the macro–structure of the play, a sequence of three main sections emerges: the first 960 lines set up and explore the nature and implications of a world governed by laws of unshakeable and unquestionable justice — the Old Law — and the problem this poses for a Judge who must be consistent in order to be true.

The debate in Heaven — 440 lines in the centre of the play — constitutes the second main section. It begins in deadlock and ends in resolution, which is achieved by simply stepping outside the paradigm — the unbreakable rule of law — that had dominated the first part. The remaining 680 lines constitute the third section, in which the resolution

that was reached in principle in the course of the debate in Heaven is shown being worked out in practice, in terms of recognisable human life.

The argument is theatrically expressed in a succession of short scenes running straight from one to the next, in which costume, dialogue, gesture, action, and music give shape and sound to the spiritual drama. Conversely, the sometimes abrupt leaps from scene to scene in terms of place, time, and mode are given unity and forward motion by the coherent and evolving pattern of argument that underlies the stage events.

The editors of the English play of *Mary Magdalene*, from the Digby MS, comment that that work 'is both a miracle play and a morality play, a composite of saint play and morality technique, together with a number of traditional scenes of the cyclic drama'.[3]

The *Eerste Bliscap*, a play, as it happens, of roughly the same length as *Mary Magdalene*, is ostensibly a miracle play or saint's play, although the Marian material itself, as we have seen, takes up only a small part of the action; like the English cycle plays, it depicts the meeting of massive — indeed, cosmic — opposing forces, at times directly but more often through human or other surrogates, drawing in a wide range of examples from diverse genres in order to indicate the significance and chart the development of this clash; in morality style, it explores the tension between human fallibility and divine Grace, expressing this tension especially through the language and conventions of the law. The *Eerste Bliscap van Maria* sets the scene for the whole cycle of seven Joys, placing the story of Mary the merciful in the context of the shift from the Old Law to the New. In its confident combination of stylish dialogue and versification, thematic coherence, and dramatic flair, the *Eerste Bliscap* is an exceptional achievement of late medieval rhetoric and dramaturgy.

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NOTES

1. *De Eerste Bliscap van Maria* en *Die Sevenste Bliscap van Onser Vrouwen* edited by W.H. Beuken(Tjeenk Willink/Noordijn, Culemborg, 1973).
2. See for an earlier discussion of this episode, P. Meredith and L.R. Muir 'The Trial in Heaven in the *Eerste Bliscap* and other European Plays' *Dutch Crossing 22* (1984) 84–92.
3. *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and e Museo 160* edited Donald C. Baker and others, *EETS OS 283* (1982).

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