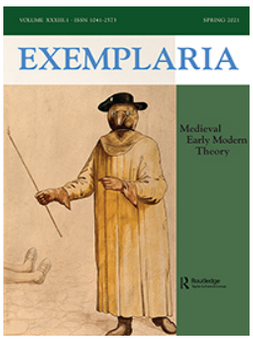

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ABSTRACT

Through a close reading of the staging of miracles in the Middle English Chester cycle, this article argues for a reappraisal of the religious didacticism of the medieval mystery cycle tradition. By approaching the Chester cycle's didactic impetus from the lens of medieval miracle theory, I argue for distinct theoretical parallels between the Thomist formulation of wonder and learning and modern cognitive dissonance theory. The interplay between wonder and dissonance throughout Chester's miracle episodes reveals how the cycle's staging of miracles functions to teach spectators not only orthodox doctrine but also a method of learning. Ultimately, Chester's religious didacticism is rendered efficacious through the sophisticated cognitive interplay between learning and performance, one that medieval thought articulated nearly 700 years prior to recent developments in cognitive theory.

KEYWORDS

Medieval drama; mystery cycles; cognitive theory; didacticism; miracles; learning; wonder

Introduction

The religious aims of the medieval mystery cycle tradition have long constituted an object of scholarly analysis, discourse, and negotiation within medieval studies. The explicit goals of mystery cycles towards – in the words of the Early Banns of the Chester cycle – "the Augmentacon and increase of the holy and catholyk ffaith of our sauyor Cryst Jesu" (Salter 1935, 132) have often been deemed "didactic" in a pejorative sense by scholars of medieval drama. Connoting the unaesthetic and propagandistic, the term "didactic" is most often employed in the context of medieval theatre studies to describe the cycles' goal of Christian indoctrination as reinforcing the dogmatism and religious hegemony often associated with the Middle Ages. While definitionally didacticism merely serves to a name an instructive or pedagogical impulse, it has, in turn, been associated with medieval drama's "explicit moralizing" (Dillon 2006, 181) and "downmarket" tactics (Tydeman 1994, 26), with its aesthetics functioning as a form of propagandistic "conspiracy" (King 2008, 238). In contrast to such descriptives, recent scholarship on medieval drama has echoed what Steven Justice (2008) diagnoses as a turn away from analyzing belief to exploring "experience" (1); valuable work focusing on other lenses of analysis, such as social relations, minoritarian subjectivity, and civic performance, serves to reappraise medieval drama's function beyond its religiously instructive aims.[1]

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Alternative critical frameworks have also emerged to renegotiate the religious didacticism of mystery cycles through questions of embodiment and spectatorship, such as Jill Stevenson's work on sensual piety and devotional practice (2010) and Margaret Rogerson's analysis of affective piety (2012). These approaches have together greatly enriched and nuanced the discourse on the purpose of medieval religious drama broadly and the mystery cycle tradition in particular. However, the rhetorical displacement of the didactic epithet in favor of language of the "devotional" or the "affective" risks eliding direct analysis of the strategies that underpin theatrical didacticism and their effects on medieval spectators. Instead of reframing the didactic in alternative language that attempts to sidestep the term's negative connotations, this essay seeks to reclaim the didactic as naming a distinct cognitive-aesthetic strategy that was central to the efficacy of the mystery cycle tradition.

In separating it from its colloquial connotations, I reconceive the "didactic" as describing how the Chester Mystery cycle enacts learning for medieval spectators within its plays depicting Christ's miracles. I define learning in this context as aligned with the Chester Banns' asserted purpose to "exhort the myndes of the comen people to gud deucon and holsom doctrine" (Salter 1935, 132). The Banns serve to define the type of learning that the cycle as a whole seeks to enact, asserting the "mynde" as the target of the cycle's didacticism while positing that such learning has both affective and cognitive results: affective "deucon" and cognitive knowledge of "doctrine." In this way, Chester's own definition of its didactic aims troubles the presumed binary between thought and feeling, affect and cognition; rather, Chester's didacticism acts upon both aspects of the mind towards its doctrinal and devotional ends. By defining learning in this way, the Chester Banns present the opportunity to read the cycle's didacticism through its own articulation of its aims, rather than prescribing anachronistic or modern readings of its purpose.[2] Thus, the Chester cycle presents its own hermeneutic for reading its didacticism, one that foregrounds engaging the "myndes" of its spectators towards learning.

In analyzing how Chester's staging of Christ's miracles models a metatheatrical process of learning itself, I argue that the cycle's didacticism functions by employing sophisticated cognitive strategies as evidenced in the text. To investigate Chester's didactic efficacy, I turn first to medieval miracle theory as situated in the Thomist discourse on wonder and learning, arguing for its role as an antecedent to current cognitive theories of learning, particularly cognitive dissonance theory. In tracing the parallels between medieval learning theory and modern cognitive dissonance theory, I suggest that the Chester cycle's didactic efficacy functioned to cognitively engage medieval spectators in ways that medieval theology articulated and recent cognitive theory substantiates, presenting a historiography of cognition that spans the medieval and the modern. Turning to the Chester text itself, I read several of its key miracle episodes through the conjoined lens of medieval miracle theory and modern cognitive dissonance theory to argue for a metatheatre of learning that underpins its didacticism. By proposing that Chester's miracles cognitively functioned not only to efficaciously prime spectators towards religious learning but to also model a medieval theory of learning itself, I aim to reframe the Chester cycle's didacticism as a sophisticated aesthetic-cognitive strategy that presages modern understandings of the interplay between learning, performance, and faith.

Wonder, learning, and medieval miracle theory

Miracles hold a privileged position in medieval frameworks of faith, learning, and knowledge, and were understood by medieval theologians as creating or strengthening religious belief. As Michael Goodich (2017) demonstrates, medieval theology broadly viewed the function of miracles as serving to "console and bring the faithful closer to God or to confound the nonbeliever or heretic" (10); medieval scholars such as Augustine, Hugh of St. Victor, and Radulphus Arden argued for the purposes behind miracles as ranging from converting nonbelievers to educating believers in the mysteries of the faith. The ability of miracles to both affectively move believers to devotion and cognitively lead nonbelievers to faith was grounded in their capacity to evoke wonder, as evidenced by the Latin term *miraculum* (miracles) etymologically featuring the root word *mirus* (a wonder) (Goodich 2017, 8). Aquinas's theology of miracles localizes miracles and their efficacy in furnishing spiritual learning in terms of the fundamental relationship between wonder, and contradiction.

Aquinas's miracle theory centers on two key concepts: – contradiction and wonder – framing both in relation to the acquisition of new knowledge. In *De Potentia*, Aquinas defines the miraculous in terms of the perception of contradiction: "We can properly say that the things that only divine power causes in things that have a natural order for the contrary effect, or the contrary way of causing, are miracles" (Aquinas 2012, 166). In the *Summa Theologica*, he expands on this to distinguish between miracles "in an absolute sense" and events that appear as miracles "in reference to ourselves" – in other words, relative to the perceiver (Aquinas 1947, I, q. 110, a. 4, reply to obj. 2); the former are solely attributable to God while the latter may be natural occurrences that merely appear as miracles due to a lack of knowledge on the part of the perceiver. Such a distinction serves to highlight the centrality of perception and pre-existing knowledge when distinguishing between miracles; however, both types of miracles operate on the basis of a perceived contradiction (regardless of whether the cause is nature or God) that reveals the perceiver's ignorance of the cause. With this recognition of ignorance comes the feeling of wonder that was central to the efficacy of the miraculous. Drawing on Aristotle's assertion that "it was because of wonder that men both now and originally began to philosophize . . . the man who is puzzled and amazed is thought to be ignorant" (1998, 113), Aquinas argues for the essential relationship between wonder and learning. Wonder is the mechanism by which one recognizes a lack of knowledge in oneself and is motivated to seek new knowledge, or as summarized in Keagan Brewer's *Wonder and Skepticism in the Middle Ages* (2019), wonder ultimately manifests as a "kind of desire for knowledge" (40). Triggered by the recognition of one's own ignorance in the face of perceived contradiction, Aquinas and his contemporaries viewed wonder as incentivizing its own amelioration through knowledge and learning: "If wonder arose from the desire to seek causes it did not understand, wonder should lead to its own replacement by knowledge (*scientia*) or *philosophia*" (Bynum 1997, 4). Wonder was thus situated within Thomist thought as the emotional response to contradictions and was equivalently viewed as the motivating source behind acquiring knowledge and ultimately learning.

Aquinas attests directly to this effect of wonder and its link to learning in his reading of Christ's relationship to wonder: "Wonder could be in Him; and He assumed this affection for our instruction, i.e. in order to teach us to wonder" (1947, IIIa, q. 15,

art. 8). This suggests that Christ himself experienced wonder in order to "teach" humanity to wonder as the means by which it could encounter and assimilate new knowledge. Citing wonder as "most effective in drawing the mind's attention" (IIIa, q. 30, art. 4, reply to obj. 1), Aquinas turned to wonder not only as a tool for learning, but as a rhetorical device that evokes the desire to learn. In addition to Aquinas, Bernard of Clairvaux advocated for invoking wonder in sermons as a "'spice' for stories" (Bynum 1997, 15); in advising priests on composing homilies, fourteenth-century rhetorician Robert of Basevorn prescribed beginning with a wonder-inducing story, usually an account of a miracle, in order to gain the audience's attention and furnish them with a motivation for learning (Bynum 1997, 16). Wonder was also rhetorically aligned with signification and exegesis, with William of Newburgh's description of miracles, stating: "We call these things marvels and prodigies [*mira et prodigiosa*] not so much because of their rarity as because they have a secret reason" (cited in Bynum 1997, 23), one that requires investigation and exegetical analysis.[3] Across medieval thought, wonder was established as the foremost response to contradiction, demanding new knowledge and serving as the essential impetus behind learning. Brewer (2019) has usefully compared the medieval formulation of wonder and learning with current, scientific understandings of wonder, asserting that across both medieval and modern frameworks wonder emerges as "an emotion with evolutionary underpinnings that is geared towards learning" (26). In mapping wonder as a transhistorical phenomenon that is situated particularly within "variation between cultures and between individuals" (26), Brewer's work usefully foregrounds my own turn to modern cognitive dissonance theory as a postmedieval framework describing the same learning process as outlined by medieval miracle theory.

Modern cognitive dissonance theory

Following the recent "cognitive literary turn," medieval studies has engaged generatively with cognitive theory as a means to approach the transhistorical "embodied-brain human" (Chance 2012, 248), producing cognitively informed readings of medieval texts ranging from early Anglo-Saxon poetry to Chaucer.[4] Medieval drama has not been exempted from this turn. Jill Stevenson's (2010) work on cognition, devotional culture, and the York cycle usefully articulates the utility of applying cognitive theory to medieval theatre as a means to "better understand how humans perceive and, specifically, how our material, and biological bodies, contribute to perceptual experience" (19). As Stevenson demonstrates, cognitive theory can effectively serve as an additional tool to further enrich longstanding critical discourses on performance and medieval theatre, particularly in the areas of phenomenology, affect, and spectatorship. Scholars such as Kerstin Pfeiffer (2012) and Nadia Thérèse van Pelt (2017) have expanded on this approach, employing such cognitive theories as the mirror neuron system, emotional contagion, and conceptual blending. These studies have centered on the affective and embodied effects of medieval drama on spectators, usefully probing how the medieval spectatorial experience can be investigated in new ways through the application of demonstrable cognitive frameworks. However, in their focus on affect, embodiment, and devotional piety, these studies follow the larger tendency within medieval drama scholarship to rhetorically distance itself from questions of didacticism and learning within medieval spectatorship. As yet unutilized within cognitive literary scholarship,

cognitive dissonance theory provides a framework to investigate the interplay between the cognitive processes of human learning and the didactic impetus of medieval drama, one that ultimately converges with medieval miracle theory.

Cognitive dissonance theory was articulated initially in psychologist Leon Festinger's 1957 study on an American religious cult and its modes of rationalization when a prophesied apocalypse failed to occur. In the face of the group's unfulfilled expectations, Festinger sought to elucidate the cognitive mechanisms at play when pre-existing cognitions (such as the belief in an imminent apocalypse) are contradicted by real events. The term *cognition* as employed by Festinger (1962) refers to "any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one's behavior" (3). According to Festinger (1962), when any such "cognition" contradicts another cognition, cognitive dissonance occurs:

> . . . *the reality which impinges on a person will exert pressures in the direction of bringing the appropriate cognitive elements into correspondence with that reality* . . .if the cognitive elements do not correspond with a certain reality which impinges, certain pressures must exist. (11, emphasis in original)

It is these "pressures" that evoke cognitive dissonance, defined as a subconscious, psychological state of discomfort that the individual is motivated to dispel. Festinger's theory details the methods employed by individuals to reduce dissonance, including attempts to disprove one of the cognitions or changing the cognition itself by gathering additional information. In this way, cognitive dissonance theory describes the mental processes at play when individuals encounter new perceptions or contradictory information that requires them to reevaluate and adjust their pre-existing cognitions. While cognitive dissonance itself does not necessitate a specific behavior, Festinger (1962) describes its function as the primary psychological motivation for seeking and assimilating new information into pre-existing cognitions, as well as for forming new cognitions altogether: in his words, "where no dissonance exists there should be a relative absence of motivation to seek support or new information at all" (30). In this way, cognitive dissonance serves as a crucial apparatus for the formation of new thoughts, opinions, and beliefs – in short, for learning itself. Since Festinger's 1957 study, cognitive dissonance has been assessed and verified within the field of cognitive neuroscience, establishing it as a demonstrable psychological and neurological phenomenon (van Veen et al. 2009).

Subsequent work on cognitive dissonance theory has identified two key phenomena that ground my analysis of the Chester cycle: vicarious cognitive dissonance and "devised events" within educational contexts. The former demonstrates that dissonance can be evoked not only in individuals who themselves experience cognitive conflict but also in those who witness others experiencing contradictory cognitions (such as spectators witnessing performers): this effect is aptly termed "vicarious cognitive dissonance" (Cooper 2007, 123). In vicarious cognitive dissonance, a parallel state of psychological discomfort occurs in observers as well as those that experience conflicting cognitions directly. The dissonance that results must be reduced in both direct participants and observers, leading to attitude change in both parties. The crucial variable for this effect to occur is for observers to perceive themselves as belonging to the same group as or sharing a social identity those directly experiencing cognitive conflict. Thus, for vicarious

cognitive dissonance to manifest within observers, "in-group identification" must be established, even if on "the most minimal pretense" (Cooper 2007, 120). In this way, vicarious cognitive dissonance depends on a factor of group identity that is shared by observers and participants in a given dissonant situation, even if the in-group identification is transient within the encounter.

The second phenomenon surrounding "devised events" emerges from cognitive dissonance theory's ramifications in reorienting foundational theories of learning. At the time of Festinger's publication, contemporary learning theory attributed human learning to systems of external reinforcement through rewards and punishment, supported by the work of psychological behaviorists B. F. Skinner and Clark Hull (Cooper 2007, 19–20). Cognitive dissonance theory and its supporting evidence suggested the opposite: human learning occurs through internal rather than external forces, namely through the internal psychological motivation to reduce the discomfort of dissonance by seeking out new information, adjusting existing cognitions, or forming new ones altogether. Cognitive dissonance theory has been subsequently applied to and generated a large body of work in educational theory and practice that bases learning on internal motivation rather than external reinforcement (Kiesler and Pallak 1976). Educational psychologists Joseph Nussbaum and Shimshon Novick have found that by inducing cognitive dissonance in learners, educators can effectively arouse the psychological motivation to accommodate new information and synthesize it with pre-existing cognitions. To induce dissonance in this way, Nussbaum and Novick (1982) demonstrate how the use of "devised event[s]" (187) by educators can serve to trigger students' awareness of their own pre-existing cognitions and to prompt a state of dissonance that would lead to the accommodation of new information.[5]

Vicarious cognitive dissonance and educational "devised events" jointly enable my reading of the Chester cycle's didacticism. As V. A. Kolve (1980) reminds us, the mystery cycles were defined by their use of "actors from the community who were known to the audience in real life … local, familiar faces" (23–24). The production of the Chester Mystery cycle by contemporary citizens of Chester, along with a cast most likely comprised of members of the town and its guilds, means that the performance would have invoked a shared sense of group identity to a high degree, providing the conditions for vicarious cognitive dissonance to occur. The medieval spectator who witnessed friends and neighbors enacting dissonance would similarly experience dissonance along the same lines, a phenomenon that grounds my analysis of the Chester cycle. As will later be shown, I would also suggest that the miracle episodes in the Chester cycle can be read as metatheatrical "devised events" that were strategically constructed to trigger and motivate learning in medieval spectators – or indeed, medieval "learners."

A medieval theory of cognitive dissonance

In light of Festinger's theory, miracles – as events that appear to contradict the laws of reality – are clear sources of cognitive dissonance. For example, Christ's healing of the blind man – as attested to in scripture and uniquely present in the Chester cycle – functions as a contradiction yielding a state of cognitive dissonance in its observers: the cognition that the man is blind (and that blindness is a permanent, inalterable state) is contradicted by the cognition of his sudden demonstrated ability to see. In order to

resolve such a dissonance, one of these cognitions must be either disproven or additional information must unify them – namely, the recognition of Christ's divinity that allows him to reverse an otherwise permanent, inalterable state of blindness. Such recognition forms the new information, or learning, that allows the dissonance to be resolved and yields a new cognition: Christ is divine. This relationship between miracles, learning, and cognitive theory has been directly addressed by religious studies scholar, Ilkka Pyysiäinen (2002), who draws on current cognitive research to argue that the concept of the "miraculous" functions cognitively to illuminate phenomena and events in external reality that cannot be easily integrated into pre-existing cognitive concepts. Ultimately, Pyysiäinen suggests that the concept of a "miracle" serves as a necessary, and even universal, cognitive framework that exists to help integrate new information into humans' conceptual frameworks. In this way, the concept of the "miraculous" is intrinsic to the process of incorporating new knowledge into pre-existing conceptual frameworks, leading Pyysiäinen (2002) to posit that "such cognitive processing occurs even in cultures in which no *explicit* concept of miracle exits, because miracles are exceptions to panhuman intuitions" (738). While Pyysiäinen doesn't explicitly address cognitive dissonance, his argument for the link between miracles as a cognitive framework and the cognitive processes of learning foregrounds the clear parallels that can be found between medieval miracle theory and Festinger's theory.

Like medieval miracle theory, cognitive dissonance theory attributes a psychological, emotional reaction to perceptions of contradiction (or in Festinger's terms, conflicting cognitions): medieval thinkers termed this reaction "wonder" while Festinger labels it "dissonance." Both wonder and dissonance are described in their respective contexts as a state of emotional tension. As Stephen Loughlin (2002) has shown, Aquinas characterized wonder itself as a form of fear (*timor*) at that which one does not understand, in which one initially "shrinks from forming a judgment concerning the event" but then is led to "investigate the matter fully, so as to render it intelligible and thus rid himself of ignorance" (10). Festinger (1962) uses the phrase "a state of psychological discomfort" (24) to characterize dissonance as a feeling that exerts both pressure and stress on individuals, leading them to seek new information. Both Festinger's and Aquinas's rhetoric suggest a state of tension and discomfort that seeks its own amelioration through the resolution of contradiction; in this way, both wonder and dissonance serve as an experiential, emotional state that demands resolution into consonance. These theories further converge in their description of how such tension is cognitively resolved: by re-evaluating existing cognitions, seeking new information, and integrating new knowledge, resulting in learning. In other words, despite their difference in rhetoric, medieval miracle theory and modern cognitive dissonance theory can be read as mapping the same cognitive process involved in learning: contradiction leading to psychological tension that is resolved by learning through the incorporation of new knowledge.

These distinct parallels reveal that medieval thinkers had their own theory of cognitive dissonance that underpinned their understanding of the mind's learning process, one that presaged Festinger's theory by over 700 years. Such parallels open up a broader area of study in terms of a historiography of cognition; in noting the transhistorical resonances between medieval and modern theories of cognition, not only are medieval conceptions of miracles and learning shown to be distinctly prescient of modern cognitive theory, but our contemporary approaches to cognition serve to substantiate medieval

theoretical frameworks that may otherwise be deemed "premodern" and "unscientific." In the case of cognitive dissonance theory, modern cognitive science is only recently demonstrating what medieval scholars like Aquinas articulated. In this way, the parallels between medieval and modern frameworks of cognition and learning present a new cognitive historiography, one that destabilizes the assumed dichotomy between the sacred and the secular as well as between religious and the scientific forms of knowledge, contributing to the larger discourse in medieval studies that challenges temporal binaries such as the "modern" and "premodern." For the purposes of this essay, modern cognitive dissonance theory enables deeper analysis of the Chester Mystery cycle's didactic efficacy, not only by tracing cognitive dissonance as it manifests textually but illuminating how Chester's metatheatrical staging of Christ's miracles enacts medieval conceptions of learning.

Chester's miracles and the presence of wonder

In turning to the Chester cycle, I frame my analysis of its miracle episodes within the larger scholarly discourse on Chester's exemplary didacticism. At one point deemed "dull, didactic Chester" (Stevens 1971, 455), Chester's "spare style" (Travis 1982, 143) is often contrasted with the realism of the York cycle and the affectivity of the Towneley and N-Town cycles. In addition to its aforementioned Banns, Chester's inclusion of an Expositor and a play devoted to the Apostle's Creed has contributed to its didactic reputation. Chester has also received special consideration due to its inclusion of eight plays depicting Christ's ministry between his nativity and crucifixion, outnumbering those featured in any other extant Middle English mystery cycle (Travis, 1982). Due to the cycle's focused reliance on the Johannine gospel, these ministry plays feature a preponderance of scriptural episodes depicting Christ's miracles. This focus on Christ's ministry orients Chester's didacticism around Christ's actions. As summarized by Alexandra Johnston (1964), Christ functions distinctly in each of the extant Middle English cycles: "In York he teaches; in Chester he acts; in Towneley he suffers; in N-Town he forgives" (217). Through its unique centering of Christ's miraculous acts, Chester is defined by its singular focus on Christ's divine authority. As Kathleen M. Ashley (1978) has argued, the cycle as a whole is "guided by a concern to demonstrate both the reality and quality of God's omnipotence," with its individual plays unified by the common theme of proving God's divine power (338). As a result, Chester's Christological didacticism focuses especially on Christ's "divinity . . . not his humanity" (Ashley 1986, 232), as demonstrated particularly by the staging of his miracles.

John J. McGavin (1990) has approached the didactic function Christ's miracles in Chester through a semiotic framework, analyzing the interplay between linguistic and nonlinguistic signs employed by Christ. In suggesting that the text's "contrastive response to the signs provided is fundamental to the didactic scheme of the cycle" (106), McGavin argues that Christ's miracles function through signification, in which his divine identity is authenticated by his nonlinguistic actions (miracles) rather than through his linguistic authority. In McGavin's view, Chester ultimately portrays belief in Christ as analogous to understanding the signification of Christ's miracles, with the refusal of belief by "evil characters" resulting from their "abuse [of] signification, either by misunderstanding and rejecting true signs or offering false signs to seduce others to false belief" (111). In this way,

McGavin argues, Chester's theophanic focus derives from the semiotics of Christ's miraculous actions based on the interplay of signification between linguistic signs and miraculous acts. However, as David Defries has argued in his work on the medieval experience of miracles, a semiotic analysis has been challenged by recent studies in cognitive science that suggest that cognitive meaning-making in response to miracles occurs on a more immediate and affective level than allowed by semiotic frameworks. In tracing the prevalence of wonder in medieval miracle accounts, Defries (2016) aptly demonstrates that medieval reactions and responses to miracles do not attest to abstracted concepts of wonder derived from semiotic signification, but rather to an affective and embodied experience of wonder; in his words, "people do not understand someone else's wonder via the concept of wonder. They feel the other person's wonder … it implies we ought to read miracle accounts primarily for their affective, rather than their semiotic, content" (242). In seeing wonder as transmitting affectively, rather than semiotically, to observers, Defries implicitly describes the phenomenon of vicarious cognitive dissonance in which spectators experience wonder even when observing, rather directly participating, in a miracle.

Drawing on this, my analysis approaches Chester's miracles not through a framework of signification, but rather as affective "devised events" – a form of metatheatre that models learning for medieval spectators through cognitive dissonance and wonder. Miracles themselves can be read as a form of performance in that their efficacy (or signification in McGavin's framework) is dependent upon a perceiving subject who makes meaning from the miraculous act. The colloquial rhetoric of miracles itself testifies to their formulation as a form of performance in that miracles are "performed" rather than "represented," "acted," or "signified." Thus, as a form of performance, miracles reflect the need for an audience. Aquinas testifies implicitly to this in defining miracles as perceived contradictions: as such, the efficacy of miracles is dependent on perceivers, or spectators, to the contradiction. In the case of the Chester cycle, its staged miracles function as a form of metatheatre performed for dual levels of spectators: the character-spectators of the miracles (played by actors) who perform their wonder/dissonance within the play-world, and the real-world spectators of the cycle itself in medieval Chester. Chester's medieval audience members, in this sense, are spectators to the staged actor-spectators' response to Christ's miracles, forming a metatheatrical staging of miracles that functions as a devised event with the purpose of triggering vicarious cognitive dissonance. In reading Chester's miracles as metatheatrical devised events aimed at learning, I will analyze key episodes of Christ's miraculous acts as they are textually represented, focusing particularly on how the Chester text stages its character-spectators' response to Christ's miracles. Their wonder, doubt, and disputation serve to trace the role of dissonance, leading either to belief or unbelief in Christ's divinity. In this way, the metatheatrical staging of miracles presents the means of reappraising Chester's didacticism as efficaciously engaging the cognitive capabilities of its medieval spectators toward learning "gud deucon and holsom doctrine."

Play XI: Christ and the doctors

Christ's first miraculous act within the Chester cycle features his childhood encounter with the Doctors at the temple where he astounds them with his knowledge of scripture. As Daniel T. Kline has observed, Chester's version of this episode foregrounds Christ's divinity more than the other extant Middle English cycles, making the episode "less

a contest over the meaning of the law than a showpiece for Jesus' authority and a proclamation of his divinity" (Kline 1992, 353). While the York and Towneley cycles as well as the surviving Coventry plays feature the episode beginning with an initial characterization of the Doctors, the Chester version begins directly with their disputation with Christ.[6] The Primus Doctor starts by asserting that Christ seems to be a receptive student of their learning: "Methinkes this child will learne our lawe;/hee taketh great tent to our talking" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 212). Christ immediately responds that God already knows "your workes in thought and deede" and asserts his unity with the Godhead: "My Father and I together bee/in on godhead withouten dread" (213). He goes on to state that as a result, he has no need of the doctors' teaching as he shares perfect knowledge with God: "We be both on, in certayntie/all these workes to rule and reade" (213). The usage of "read" presents a double-entendre that foreshadows the rest of the exchange, with the Middle English "to read" meaning both "to study writing" and "to interpret, discern, or predict" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2020). Despite lacking the ability to "read" in the sense of literacy, Christ asserts that he has already "read" the Doctors' "workes in thought and deede," including their knowledge of the law, which they assume to be accessible only to the literate through scripture. The Primus Doctor takes Christ's assertion of his divine knowledge as absurd, stating "Hearkes this child in his bourdinge!/Hee weenes hee kenes more then hee knowes," before accusing him of being too young to have such knowledge, of either the scriptures or literacy itself. "Certes, sonne, thou art over-yonge/by cleargie cleane to knowe our lawes . . . Yett art thou neither of might nor mayne/to knowe yt as a clarke might knowe" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 213). Christ responds, "The kingdome of heaven is in me light/and hath me annoynted as a leach,/and given me playne power and might/the kingdome of Heaven to tell and teach" (213). Following this assertion of his power through "the kingdome of heaven," Christ attests to his knowledge of the law by recounting the Ten Commandments, provoking the doctors' astonishment: "Behould how hee hase learned our lawes/and he learned never on booke to read" (213). The Primus Doctor responds with wonder, stating "As wide in world as I have went,/yet found I never so ferly fare" (Mills 1992, 204). Derived from the Old English adjective *fáerlic* referring to fear, the term is defined as meaning "wondrous or marvellous" (*OED* 2020), attesting directly to the Doctors' state of wonder. Their wonder results from the conflicting cognitions mapped by the episode – namely that Christ's youth and illiteracy precludes his knowledge of scripture. Their cognitive dissonance, or wonder, emerges in reaction to Christ's demonstrated scriptural knowledge – his recitation of the Ten Commandments – which functions as evidence to his claim of divine knowledge that transcends literacy. The Doctors' conflicting cognitions yields a wonder-dissonance reaction that is resolved as the episode concludes. After Christ's recitation of the commandments, the Secundus Doctor recognizing his divinity and salvific purpose: "By matters that this child hath meant/to know our laws, both less and more,/out of Heaven I hope him sent/into the Earth to salve our sore" (Mills 1992, 205). The Tertius Doctor declares "Sire, this child of mickle price/which is young and tender of age,/I hold him sent from the High Justice to win again our heritage" (205). In this way, the Doctors' responses map the dissonance process, with the first doctor declaring his wonder, the second articulating his "hope" of Christ's divinity as a new cognition, and the third asserting Christ as "sent from the High Justice to win again our heritage," evidencing their new knowledge of Christ as messiah. The Doctors thus resolve

their dissonance by incorporating this new knowledge into their cognitive frameworks, thereby learning the truth of Christ's divinity.

Beyond tracing the process of cognitive dissonance by perceiving contradiction (the miracle of Christ's nonliterate knowledge) leading to wonder and eventually resolution, this episode also presents the question of Christ's divinity in relation to the process of learning itself. The episode functions to invert the anticipated epistemic power structure between Christ's illiteracy and the Doctors' literacy. While the Doctors begin with the aim of teaching Christ, Christ ultimately instructs them in learning the fact of his own divinity. The cognitive dissonance demonstrated in the Doctors' response thus functions as a metacommentary on learning itself, demonstrating how divine knowledge can be transmitted apart from the written word. In this way, the episode functions to theatrically model the type of learning that the Chester cycle itself embodies: learning without books or even literacy. The miraculous proof of Christ's divinity in this episode is the miracle of learning without texts. This type of nonliterate learning serves as a model of apprehending spiritual knowledge, mirroring the Chester cycle as a "quick book" (Davidson 1981). As Chester's ministry plays progress, the Jewish spiritual authorities are confronted repeatedly with their exclusive reliance on textual authority as the sole means of attaining knowledge and learning. Christ's miracles serve to challenge this reliance, forming an ongoing metadiscourse on the relationship between textuality, learning, and spiritual knowledge.

Play XIII: The healing of the blind man and the Raising of Lazarus

The challenge to the hegemony of textuality occurs again in the miracle episode that is exclusive to the Chester cycle: Play XIII's Healing of the Blind Man. As Ashley (1978) observes, its unique inclusion in Chester aptly fits within the cycle's overarching interest in depicting God's divine power across its Old and New Testament Plays (390–91). Drawn nearly verbatim from John 9, the episode traces Christ's healing of a man born blind by placing mud on his eyes, followed by the Pharisee's interrogation of the miracle. The episode opens with the apostles questioning Christ as to the reason for the man's blindness, whether due to original sin, his parents' sin, or his own (ll. 44–50). Christ responds:

> Hit was neither for his offence,
> neither the synne of his parentes,
> or other fault or negligence
> that hee was blynd borne;
> but for this cause spetiallye:
> to sett forth Goddes great glorye,
> his power to shewe manifestlye
> this mans sight to reform.
> While the daye is fayre and bright,
> my Fathers workes I must worke right. (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 232)

Here Christ states the purpose of his forthcoming miracle: to demonstrate his divine sonship and power. In staging the miracle and the dissonance that ensues, the episode presents its characters with the opportunity to acknowledge of Christ's divinity; however, only the blind man himself (denoted in the Latin as "Caecus" within the text) successfully

reconciles his dissonance and comes to belief. The range of responses to miracle by other characters serves to map their individual journey towards or away from belief through their engagement with dissonance.

Upon being healed, Caecus is first confronted by two neighbors, who demonstrate their dissonance at his sight: the Primus Vicinus declares, "If I the trueth should saye,/ this is the blynd man which yesterdaye/asked our almes as we came this waye./Yt is the verey same" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 233). Secundus Vicinus' response immediately attempts to resolve this dissonance, offering an alternative cognition that would reconcile the contradiction: "No, no, neighbour, yt is not hee,/but yt is the likest to him that ever I see/One man to another like may bee, and so is hee to him" (233). This statement presents a resolution of the initial dissonance by concluding that the blind man and the man that can now see must be two different people, connected only by their "likeness." Caecus, however, quickly refutes their conclusion, stating "Truely I am hee/that was blynd and nowe I see," challenging them to "enquire of all my kynne" (234). The neighbors press him for details and upon hearing his account of the miracle, they present him before the Pharisees, jointly advising him to "these things denye" and accusing him of deception ("thou wicked wight") (235). Already the neighbors have employed two disparate cognitions for resolving their dissonance: first, that they are seeing a lookalike imposter, then that Caecus himself is lying. Caecus's interrogation by the Pharisees unleashes a multitude of additional cognitions aimed at justifying their disbelief in the miraculous event, such as that no man of God would heal on the Sabbath and that Jesus must be mad (ll. 131–34) as well as that Caecus was feigning his original blindness (ll. 141–44). In each of these instances, the Pharisees seek to reconcile their dissonance through several alternative cognitions save the acknowledgement of Christ's divinity. Throughout this exchange, Caecus seems uncertain of Christ's divine identity or the authority that allows him to heal, instead suggesting to the Pharisees that he may be "a prophet" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 236). Following Caecus' parents' testimony to the Pharisees, which affirms that he is indeed their son and that he was truly blind and now can miraculously see, Caecus reconciles his own dissonance about his miraculous healing:

> And to this I dare be bould,
> there is noe man that ever could
> restore a creature to his sight
> that was blynd borne and never sawe light.
> If he of God were not, iwis,
> hee could never worke such thinges as this. (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 239)

In arguing that "noe man" could restore one's sight, Caecus deduces that Christ is not a man but is rather "of God," arriving at the knowledge of Christ's divinity that the miracle was intended to demonstrate (as stated by Christ at the beginning of the episode). The Pharisees, however, respond to this proffered resolution of their dissonance – the assertion of Christ's divinity – by falling back onto another dissonance: "What sinfull knave! Wilt thou teach us/which all the scriptures can discusse,/and of our livinge be so vertuous?" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 239). At this point, the episode deviates from the Johannine text with the insertion of the Pharisees' recourse to their own spiritual authority based on their knowledge of scripture. As in the previous episode between

Christ and the Doctors, an implicit critique of illiteracy emerges as a challenge to Christ's divine authority: the Pharisees refuse to resolve their dissonance through acknowledgement of Christ's divinity as professed by Caecus, instead asserting that a blind beggar is incapable of apprehending spiritual truth due to his illiteracy and presumed sinfulness. Here the Chester text once again demonstrates a particular interest in highlighting the conflict between trusting scriptural authority versus Christ's divine actions, with the Pharisees relying on their assertion of textual knowledge to undermine Caecus's claim. As the episode concludes, the Pharisees exit with their dissonance unresolved due to their refusal to accept the only possible reconciling cognition: acknowledgement of Christ's divinity. The implications of their exit suggest that their ultimate failure to come to belief results from their fundamental misunderstanding of learning itself. Instead of channeling their wonder towards acquiring new knowledge, they maintain their pre-existing cognitions about the hegemony of literacy and fail to incorporate new knowledge towards cognitive resolution. Caecus, on the other hand, rencounters Christ as the episode concludes, who queries him, "Beleeves thou in God Sonne trulye?" Caecus responds by asserting his belief and incorporating the new knowledge of Christ's divinity: "Yea, gratious lord. Whoe is hee?" (239). As in scripture, Christ replies by identifying himself: "Thou hast him seene with thy eyee/Hee is the same that talketh with thee" to which Caecus declares "Then I here, I honour him with hart free/and ever shall serve him until I dye" (239–40). Caecus's journey through dissonance toward belief concludes with this moment of authentication of his cognition resolution and learning, verified by Christ's direct admission of his divinity. Through its characters' disparate engagement with cognitive dissonance, this episode models not only cognitive dissonance as the learning mechanism that leads Caecus to the true knowledge of Christ's divinity but also functions as a condemnation of those who maintain conflicting cognitions through their recourse to textual hegemony and disengagement from spiritual learning.

If cognitive dissonance is at play within these miracle episodes where learning is attained, it would follow that it is absent from moments where learning is not achieved, or is unnecessary. While the Pharisaical characters in Play XIII fail to learn through their refusal to resolve their dissonance, the Chester cycle proceeds to depict Christ's most wondrous miracle, the Raising of Lazarus, with a distinct absence of dissonance in the spectating characters. As in the episode with the Blind Man, this episode begins with Christ's declaration that Lazarus's illness and death ultimately serve to demonstrate his divinity: "That sickenes is not deadly/but Godes Sonne to glorifie./Loe, I am him, as may be seene" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 243). However, prior the miracle itself, Mary and Martha assert that Christ is capable of healing their brother and anticipate the miracle of resurrection to take place: "Had Jesus my lord binne in this,/this case had not befalne . . . Yett may hee doe for us in this case/and him to life call" (243). In this way, their faith in Christ's ability to perform miracles is already established, in contrast to Caecus who has no previous knowledge of Christ or his capacity to heal. With Christ's arrival, the sisters lament Lazarus's death but immediately state that Christ can "aright" the death: "What thing thou askest of God almight,/ hee will grant yt thee in height" (246). Christ demands that Martha affirm her belief in him prior to performing the miracle (ll. 389–93), to which she unequivocally responds: "Lord, I leeve and leeve mon/that thou arte Christ, Godes Sonne . . . /This have I leeved steedfastlye" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 247). The repetition of "leeve" asserts her

belief in past, present and future tenses – from the present "I leeve" to her implied continuing belief into the future ("leeve mon") and her past belief "have I leeved." In this way, Martha's belief is situated as a pre-existing cognition prior to the miracle itself being performed. Once the miracle is performed and Lazarus is raised from the dead, Mary and Martha immediately respond with repeated declarations of Christ's divinity, skipping any indication of dissonance or even surprise within the text; rather, they instantly apprehend the significance of the miracle as a sign of Christ's divinity: "By verey signe nowe men maye see/that thou arte Godes Sonne" (250). Lazarus also betrays no sign of wonder or dissonance at his own resurrection, immediately declaring "A, lord, blessed most thou be/which from death to life hast raysed mee/through thy micle might" (249). It is important to note that the absence of textual indicators of dissonance in this episode does not preclude the likelihood that in performance the actors may have portrayed their characters' joy, surprise, or any number of other responsive affects. However, the text does indicate a distinct absence of wonder in the Thomist sense: fear leading to seeking new knowledge. The repetition of Mary and Martha's pre-existing knowledge of Christ's divinity, articulated multiple times before the miracle itself and asserted once again after the fact, explicates their relative lack of wonder; in this way, the episode suggests that wonder, or dissonance, is unnecessary for those characters who already possess belief through knowledge of Christ's divinity. This is further substantiated by Mary's declaration that the miracle is a "verey signe" of Christ's divine sonship for mankind rather than for the sisters themselves. Thus the miracle of Lazarus's resurrection is not a dissonant episode for its character-spectators as there is no need for learning, suggesting that where there is pre-existing belief in Christ's divinity, cognitive dissonance is not at play or may in fact be unnecessary.

In juxtaposing the Raising of Lazarus with the other miraculous episodes we have considered, cognitive dissonance is demonstrated to only occur in spectators of miracles who do not believe in Christ's divinity, not those who already do. The Doctors and Caecus experience cognitive dissonance and wonder as the means to incorporate of the new knowledge of Christ's divinity into belief, while those who refuse to resolve their dissonance, such as the Pharisees and Caecus's neighbors, fail to come to belief. This demonstrates that the presence of cognitive dissonance in the miracle episodes of the Chester cycle serves to map the opportunity for incorporating new knowledge of Christ's divinity, furnishing the learning that produces belief – an opportunity only fulfilled by those who resolve their dissonance.

Dissonance beyond miracles: Herod and Pentecost

This dynamic between cognitive dissonance, wonder, and apprehending spiritual truth can also be traced in additional plays within the cycle that do not directly depict Christ's miracles but rather center on the revelation of his divinity, such as Play VIII's depiction of Herod's wrath against Christ's foretold birth and Play XXI, the Pentecost Play. In briefly addressing these plays, I demonstrate how cognitive dissonance manifests in encounters with Christ's divinity beyond his miraculous acts but still functions to model learning.

In the case of Herod, his characterization across the mystery cycle tradition as mad can be reapproached through the lens of cognitive dissonance as a pathological refusal to

learn.[7] In Play VIII, Herod rejects the Magi's assertion that the Messiah has been born, hyperbolically declaring himself "kinge of all mankynde" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 164). The Magi cite prophecies foretelling Christ's birth and Herod's own Doctor offers to read the scriptures directly, "the trueth to certyfie" (166). Upon hearing the prophecies himself, Herod explosively declares, "That is false!" (168). When faced with the contradiction between his own kingship and the prophesied kingship of Christ, Herod does not attempt to rationalize or bridge the conflicting cognitions in order to reduce his dissonance. Rather, he instantly denies the "trueth" of the prophecies and channels his dissonance into plotting the slaughter of the innocents. Herod's failure to engage with or assimilate the new information presented by the Doctor predicates the absence of learning; instead, his response to conflicting cognitions is strictly denial, refusing to even contend with the cognition of Christ's kingship. His disengagement from the cognitive process of learning, gives new meaning to the repeated textual references to his madness.[8] While Herod's madness is repeatedly noted in the text by multiple characters (including himself), cognitive dissonance grounds his irrationality beyond simply wrath or rhetoric; his response to new knowledge reveals his disassociation from the cognitive process of learning itself. His madness results accordingly from his refusal to resolve his dissonance, keeping him in a state of psychological distress and unresolved tension for the remainder of the episode. Ultimately, cognitive dissonance illuminates Herod's madness as the product of neither his wrath nor his bombastic rhetoric, but rather the result of his failure to engage with his dissonant wonder and his self-alienation from learning.

Chester's Pentecost play, on the other hand, presents another episode in which a miraculous event invokes wonder leading to new knowledge of Christ's divinity. Upon encountering the apostles speaking in foreign languages, two foreigners attest to their wonder:

> PRIMUS ALIENIGENA.
> A, fellowe, fellowe, for Godes pittie,
> are not theise men of Gallilee?
> Our language the can as well as wee,
> as ever eate I bread!
>
> SECUNDUS ALIENIGENA.
> Well I wotte, by my lewtee,
> that within theise dayes three
> one of them could not speake with mee
> for to have binne dead. (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 394–95)

Founded on their pre-existing cognition of the disciples' monolingualism, the foreigners' wonder-dissonance reaction emerges as they witness the gift of tongues that enables the disciples to speak languages ranging from "Mesopotamye, Capadocie and Jurye . . . Asye, Fryzeland and Pamphilye, Egipt, right into Lybie" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 395). They determine to "goe we therfore and espye, howe goes this wondrous case" (395). Directly invoking the language of wonder, they exit not with a resolution of their dissonance, but rather with the determination to "espye how goes this wondrous case" and seek new knowledge leading to cognitive resolution, implying that they arrive at belief in Christ's

divinity offstage. This ending sharply contrasts both the N-Town and York versions of Pentecost; drawn more directly from scripture, York and N-Town's Jewish characters witness the disciples speaking in tongues and ridicule them as drunk (Sugano 2007; Davidson 2011). In deviating from the scriptural accounts of Pentecost and replacing the unbelieving Jewish characters with the wondering foreigners, Chester once again demonstrates its didactic insistence on staging how miracles lead to wonder as a motivator for learning Christ's divinity and arriving at belief.

Together, these five episodes – from Christ's ministry miracles to the Herod and Pentecost episodes – trace a singular model for learning via cognitive dissonance as depicted through wonder and its motivating relationship to seeking new knowledge, ultimately leading to belief. For characters like the Doctors, Caecus, and the foreigners, wonder instigates the process of incorporating the new knowledge of Christ's divinity; in these instances, the wonder-dissonance reaction is ultimately resolved by learning that leads to belief. Dissonance is correspondingly either absent in characters like Mary and Martha who have already "learned" belief, or left unresolved by those who refuse to engage in the learning process, such as the Pharisees and Herod. These episodes also stage an uneasy tension between scriptural authority and miraculous acts as modes of apprehending the truth of Christ's divinity. While episodes like Christ and the Doctors and the Healing of the Blind Man refute a hegemonic approach to textuality and literacy as the sole means of apprehending spiritual truth, Herod's rejection of the prophetic scriptures is depicted as unequivocally problematic, and indeed, "mad." As a result, the cycle does not definitively depict miracles as the sole way of apprehending its didactic theme of Christ's divinity; rather, these episodes portray the willful misuse or refutation of scripture as dangerous, an authoritative tool that – fallen into the wrong hands of the Pharisees or Herod – can be weaponized against spiritual learning. This ambivalent portrayal of scriptural authority could be read potentially as reflecting the Catholic genealogy of the cycle with its heightened emphasis on staging miracles, in contrast to early modern Protestant biblical drama that often replaced depictions of miracles with scriptural quotations (Kelley 2017, 56–57). Conversely, there is also ample opportunity to read this ambivalence as indicative of the growing Protestant influence that emphasized the centrality of correct approaches to reading scripture. The possibility of such disparate readings reflects what Lawrence Clopper, Theresa Coletti, and Paul Whitfield White have observed: Chester's contextualization within England's "long reformation" (Coletti 2007, 536) results in the cycle eliding adherence to "a single political or religious agenda" (Clopper 2001, 234).[9]

Play XXIII: the Antichrist Play

The final episode under consideration contrasts Chester's earlier portrayal of miracles, further nuancing the relationship between miracles and cognitive dissonance with regards to learning spiritual truth; in its penultimate play, the Coming of the Antichrist, the cycle troubles the status of miracles themselves as consistent indicators of divinity. Once Chester again presents an anomaly within the extant Middle English mystery cycle corpus; exclusive to Chester, the Antichrist Play is preoccupied with the veracity of miracles, depicting its titular character's reign and demise prior to the Play of the Last Judgement. The play's

late addition to the Chester manuscript has led scholars such as Pamela M. King (2012) to read the play as reflecting a particular post-Reformation anxiety about the authority granted to miracles: "The Chester cycle in its post-Reformation manuscripts reveals how early Protestant authorities, the Bible-believers of their time, mistrusted an audience's abilities to distinguish between illusion and reality" (391). However, Cameron Hunt McNabb (2016) offers a contrasting reading of the episode, attributing the play's emphasis on the miracle of the Eucharist (which, McNabb notes, was specifically critiqued in Christopher Goodman's objections to the cycle's Catholic elements) to earlier anti-Lollard sentiments that sought to reify Catholic orthodoxy (23). Though reaching disparate conclusions, both King and McNabb's readings of the play reflect the fraught religious politics surrounding the final years of Chester's performance. For the purpose of our discussion, however, the Coming of the Antichrist play dually demonstrates the cognitive dissonance that results from the Antichrist's mimicry of Christ's miracles and the Chester dramatist or compiler's familiarity with contemporary medieval miracle theory that ultimately underpins the cycle's didactic framework as a whole.

The play begins with the Antichrist's entrance, announcing his divinity to four earthly kings who demand proof of his messianic status through "a signe that wee may see" in the form of "wonders" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 410). Subtly parodying Christ's, the Antichrist proceeds to resurrect two dead men (and later himself) as evidence for his messianic status in fulfilment of "Whollye Wrytte" (412). The kings profess their belief in his divinity and receive his false Holy Spirit, followed by the entrance of the prophets Helias and Enock. Upon denouncing the Antichrist as an imposter, the prophets trigger a dissonant state in the kings, who are aptly confused not only that Helias and Enock (long dead) are alive but that they refute the Antichrist's demonstrated divinity. Testing the prophets' claim, the kings demand "prooffes of disputacon" (421). In what becomes a stand-off between the prophets' and the Antichrist's miracles, the episode stages the question of miracles as proof of divinity by posing a meta-level of cognitive dissonance. Building on the intrinsic cognitive dissonance that miracles invoke, a secondary cognitive dissonance is constructed about the instability of miracles as consistent indicators of divinity. The episode resolves this dissonance by directly invoking medieval miracle theory's ontological argument on the nature of miracles. The Antichrist declares, "myracles and marveyles I did also, I counsel you, therefore, both too, to worshippe me," to which Helias counters:

> The were no myracles but mervelles thinges
> that thou shewed unto these kinges
> through the fyendes crafte. (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 424)

In referring distinctly to "myracles" and "mervelles things," Helias explicitly cites the medieval distinction between miracles and marvels. Such a distinction preceded Aquinas's explication of miracles, having been previously delineated by both Augustine and Gerald of Wales (Ward 1987, 8); drawing on his predecessors, Aquinas defines a true miracle as that which occurs exclusively through God's power while marvels are extraordinary events that are executed through natural means. In *De Potentia*, Aquinas speaks directly to the question of the ability of devils

to perform miracles, arguing that "devils can act marvelously in us in two ways: in one way by the real change of a material substance; in the second way by a delusion of the senses from a change in imagination. But neither action is miraculous" (2012, 174). Thus, "devils cannot work true miracles" in that they are not executed through God's power, but rather through "natural causes" or "trickery" (176). Aquinas goes on to explicitly address the miraculous acts that will be performed by the Antichrist, arguing that these will not be true miracles but rather merely marvels: "He will do some things by trickery, in which things there will be neither a real effect nor a miracle. He will also do some things by a real transformation of material substances but not a real miracle, since natural causes with accomplish them" (176). In this way, Helias' description of the Antichrist's acts as "no myracles but mervelles things" originating "through the fyendes crafte" employs Aquinas's ontology of miracles, suggesting that the dramatist or compiler behind the Chester text was familiar with medieval miracle theory's distinction between miracles and marvels. As the episode concludes, Helias and Enock present two patristic miracles as the means of testing the Antichrist's response to true miracles: the miracle of the Trinity and the miracle of the Eucharist. In his unequivocal rejection of both, the Antichrist's deceptive heresy is revealed and the kings abandon their faith in him, with the second king attesting to his own learning by stating "Nowe am I wyse made" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 432). With their dissonance resolved, the kings convert back to orthodox belief and miracles, rather than marvels, are once again depicted as the means of discerning true divinity and learning spiritual truth.

Conclusion

By reading such miraculous, "didactic" moments in the Chester cycle through the conjoined lens of medieval miracle theory and cognitive dissonance, this article has sought to illuminate Chester's sophisticated engagement with the cognitive processes behind learning. Far from being "didactic" in the pejorative sense, Chester's miracle plays efficaciously engage their audience in learning on a sophisticated, cognitive level. By affecting dissonance in its audience through vicarious cognitive dissonance and subsequently staging the means by which new knowledge and learning is achieved, these episodes effectively teach their audience how to learn through cognitive dissonance – or, in Thomist terms, through wonder deployed towards the acquisition and incorporation of new spiritual knowledge. Thus the didactic function of the Chester cycle was dual in purpose: the audience of the Chester cycle would have come away from its performance having learned both orthodox doctrine and the biblical narrative as well as the cognitive process of learning itself. In this way, the didacticism of the Chester cycle is not only invested in teaching Christian orthodoxy but modeling learning by staging the cognitive process of wonder-dissonance, a process that when correctly engaged leads to belief. The frequent disassociation between learning and textual authority throughout these episodes portrays learning as a process that is accessible beyond textuality, through the cognitive apparatuses that undergird the mind's ability to process new information through contradiction and wonder. The Chester text evidences that both medieval theologians and dramatists were aware of this cognitive process and explicitly invoked it centuries prior to our current cognitive theories of learning. For medieval studies as a discipline,

this signals an opportunity for further scholarship on the didactic efficacy of medieval drama and literature. Within the current post-secular turn in literary and critical studies, there is recourse now more than ever to recenter the aesthetics, affects, and effects of religious didactic literature within critical discourse. By tracing the parallels between medieval and modern theories of learning, I hope to have demonstrated how new approaches to an historiography of cognition can assuage fears that the cognitive turn within the humanities is unidirectional; rather, medieval studies itself shows that modern cognitive theories are the inheritors of the longstanding questions of learning, knowledge and the mind's capacity to wonder.

Notes

1. Here I am thinking of such works as in King (2006), Enders (2002), and Beckwith (2001), as well as more recent publications that foreground questions of sexuality (Solberg 2014), bodily pain (Ciobanu 2018), and the grotesque (Gerhardt 2019).
2. The N-Town plays' Banns also survive but function to outline the structure of the cycle, rather than asserting a holistic purpose behind the performance. In this area, Chester is unique amongst the extant Middle English Mystery cycles. See Moore (1993, 91–122)
3. Marvels and miracles were distinct from one another in medieval miracle theory, a point I shall address in relation to Chester's Play of the Antichrist.
4. See, for instance, the special issue of *postmedieval* (2012) on "Cognitive Alterities" (edited by Jane Chance and Passaro D. Antony).
5. "The first crucial step in an instructional strategy for facilitating accommodation [of new information] should be *making every student aware of his own preconceptions*. To achieve this purpose, there is a need for some devised event capable of promoting exposure of preconceptions in all students … The role of this … is to create a state of 'conceptual conflict' that would hopefully lead to the expected accommodation." (Nussbaum and Novick 1982, 187– 88)
6. I am citing from Lumiansky and Mills 1974 edition of the Chester cycle; however, I am following David Mills' assessment of the misordering of Play IX due to a transcription error (see Mills [1992], ll. 282–95n).
7. On Herod's madness see Doob (1974, 95–133) and Taylor (2013, 119–121).
8. Earlier in Play VIII, a Messenger attests directly to Herod's instability and penchant toward madness: "For if kinge Herode here you soe saye, he would goe wood, by my faye, and flye out of his skynne" (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 162). The Angel who later warns Joseph of Herod's plot to kill Jesus similarly points to Herod's irrationality: "Herode, that would have had you slayne/hee is marred, both might and mayne" (203). Even Herod himself attests to his irrational tendencies, saying "for wrath I am nere wood" (173).
9. See also White (1999, 2012).

Notes on contributor

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