

Enaction - Imagination and Image: Ignatian Prayer in *The Ascension*

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Abstract

*In 1572, Protestant divine Christopher Goodman criticized the presentation of Chester Cycle. Given new documents that have recently come to light, the conference, Chester Cycle 2010: Danger and Peril to Her Majesty, examined religio-political context of the Catholic plays. To address the provocative title of the conference, the production of *The Ascension*, the nineteenth of twenty-three plays in the cycle, highlighted Catholicism in the script in the pageant wagon performance. Exploration of diverse approaches revealed an unusual staging of this religious play. To wit, the salient features of Elizabethan acting, suspension and surprise, figured prominently in the period style. Moreover, the Ignatian Method of Prayer led to a reflective approach to acting. The cast read scriptural readings and Gospels in preparation for the Feast of the Ascension and envisioned images. After the actors re-read the scene, they improvised roles from the readings. Finally, the actors' improvised and designed actions became medieval and Tudor architectural elements in the human set design. Period acting, Jesuit prayer, and Medieval and Renaissance imagery converged in this imaginative interpretation. This new method is called *Enaction: Image and Imagination*.*

Key Words: Theatre, Jesuit, Chester Cycle, Tudor, Elizabethan, Ignatian Prayer

1.1 Historical Context

The Chester Cycle 2010 addressed commentary on the City of Chester mystery plays in the religio-political milieu through papers and performances. Inspiration for the Chester Cycle conference came from two sources. Firstly, Protestant clergyman Christopher Goodman had criticized the Chester Cycle in newly discovered letters. These findings led to the research question: "What did Protestant divine Christopher Goodman object to in the Chester Cycle presentation of the Christian story from Creation to Judgment in 1572?" Though Goodman failed to prevent the 1572 presentation of the plays, his complaints heralded the death knell for the English cycles. Secondly, Alexandra Johnston incorporated these data in her new authoritative edition of the plays, leading to the conference theme, "Peril and Danger to Her Majesty." To assess the interaction between the conference theme and *The Ascension* production, fresh interpretations of the historical context will be considered.

The twenty-third play, *The Ascension*, emphasized its Catholic roots by incorporating period acting and imagery into the Chester Cycle 2010 presentation. Research on Medieval and Renaissance theatrical styles led to specific stylistic choices in speech, posture and gesture that echoed Catholic art of the Elizabethan era. To further underscore the Catholic intent of the Cycle, the Ignatian method of prayer served as a rehearsal technique. The cast read, envisioned and improvised scriptural scenes. The actor's bodies became an architectural element, grounded in medieval and Tudor imagery, for the human scenic design on a pageant wagon. By applying these aesthetic characteristics, the actors expressed their words and deeds viscerally to achieve historical verisimilitude in a new acting method entitled *Enaction – Image and Imagination*. To clarify this unique process, the context, content, and rehearsal process of *The Ascension* will be examined in the religio-political framework.

Conflict between Catholics and Protestants raged during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. As a result, politics played an increasingly important role in sixteenth-century English drama. In the sixteenth century, the government banned plays that did not concur with the monarch's faith. Given the doctrinal controversy surrounding the Chester Cycle, overt allegiance to such heterodoxical plays posed a risk to the Queen.

This research was supported in part by grants from the Study of Catholic Culture and Traditions, and Colleges of Music and Fine Arts and Humanities and Natural Sciences, the Departments of English and Theatre Arts and Dance, the Office of Grants and Research and the Office of Mission and Ministry of Loyola University

In her conference paper, Heather Mitchell (2010) noted that although Protestants, Catholics, and Puritans disagreed about staging the Cycle, when Archbishop Grindal's letter sought to forestall the production, the City of Chester claimed that the letter dated 15 May, 1572 did not arrive in time to stop the Whitsun plays. Mitchell further posited that the City counted on its Great Charter from Henry the VII in 1506 to protect its citizens from the Archbishop's wrath. In her conference presentation Alexandra Johnston (2010) conjectured that Chester assumed civil power it did not have. Finally, David Mills (1985) noted that Chester, famous for its "independent spirit and established traditions," had proudly supported earlier Cycle productions (p. 3). Whether the 1572 Chester Cycle was motivated by independence, defiance or civic pride, the City demonstrated its commitment to Catholic traditions amidst spiritual turmoil during the early reign of Queen Elizabeth.

The English Cycles presented enjoyable dramatizations that strayed from fidelity to sacrosanct narratives. Together with the other extant Cycles, such as the York, Towneley, N-Town, and Coventry Cycles, the Chester Cycle did include extra-Biblical elements such as Catholic catechism, liturgy and the apocrypha. Goodman took exception to the Chester Cycle in part because of the guilds' humorous approach to sacred themes. Mills (1985) acknowledged that the Chester Cycle offered a "flavor of the Bible" (p. 6). Indeed, the Chester Cycle digressed from the Biblical text during the Expositor scene as well as the Balaam and Balaak episodes in particular. While this censure is true in the other plays from the Chester Cycle, *The Ascension* adhered closely to Biblical scripture. Whereas the apostles ask "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" in Acts 1:6, Phillip asked on everyone's behalf in *The Ascension* (Johnson, 2010, 19:6-8) to which Jesus responded to Phillip by concealing the time of his return: "know that ye not may" (Johnson, 2010, 19:12). This dialogue illustrates the faithfulness of *The Ascension* to the Bible in the Chester Cycle. (Fig. 1). Despite the occasional digression from its sacred source, the entertaining performance of Biblical events contributed to the Chester Cycle's enduring popularity.

1.2 Text

The text of the Chester Cycle performed in 1572 lies between the medieval and Elizabethan periods. According to Loyola medieval specialist John Sebastian (2010), Tudor editors modernized the text for the Elizabethan audience; therefore, the mixed meter is owed in part to fifteenth-century editing of the sixteenth-century text. According to F.P. Wilson (1969), whereas the flowing verse became popular after 1557, a significant metric shift in verse characterized the 1570s. The flowing anapestic meter, which consists of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable, characterized the medieval poetic style. The iamb, which consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, characterized Elizabethan verse. It is notable that this change in metric style coincided with as Elizabeth's ascension to the throne in 1558. By the 1580s, the iambic tumbling verse, the heartbeat rhythm so prevalent in Shakespearean verse, came to the fore. Given its production in the 1572, the Chester Cycle combined both the anapestic and iambic meters in the same verse line. It is possible that this shift from triple anapestic meter to duple meter of the iamb in the Chester Cycle represents the transition from the communal medieval drama with everyman characters to plot-driven Elizabethan plays with three-dimensional characters. Consequently, metric verse in the Chester Cycle served as a bridge between medieval and Elizabethan periods.

The City of Chester was noted for its action-oriented portrayal of the Cycle. Whereas the anapestic and iambic meter created a musical quality, the phrasing and forms of speech underscored the characterization. To assess the nature of the text, stage directions of the entire Cycle were tracked. Verbs, such as sit, stand, lead, follow, come, and go, delineated what characters did in scripture, gospels, and *The Ascension* text. How a particular character moved is revealed through adverbs; however, given the paucity of adverbs in *The Ascension's* devotional poetry, actors mimed verbs, adverbs, adjectives and nouns to concretize the daily scriptural readings and *The Ascension* script. Building upon this script analysis, several exercises by Cecily Berry (1988), the vocal coach of the Royal Shakespeare Company elucidated the phrasing. The actors accentuated line endings by turning the corner on a comma, standing on a block for a question mark, jumping on an exclamation point and stopping on a period. To channel their voices to the other characters on the pageant wagon, the actors played hide and seek, whispering, speaking and shouting the text from distant places in the room. To emphasize obstacles to achieving one's acting goal in the production, the cast surrounded Jesus as he tried to speak to Phillip who stood outside of the circle of apostles. Finally, to heighten the meter in the verse, choreographed dance steps encouraged the actors to embody the rhythmic shifts. Whereas the iambic stress became a march on the back beat, the anapestic stress began with walks and a jump which landed on the third beat.

Emphasis on speech forms, punctuation and phrasing added rhythm to the timing of the show. The cadenced physicalization transformed the written text into interactive dialogue.

To point up the content of the Chester Cycle which outraged Goodman, the creative team identified Jesus' profuse exsanguinations as the most offensive aspect of *The Ascension*; accordingly, the play emphasized the outpouring of Christ's blood still fresh forty-three days after His death. Consider the following passage:

These drops now with good intent
 90 to my Father I will present
 that good men who on earth be lentliving
 shall know openly
 how graciously that I them bought,
 and, for their good works, that I have wrought
 95 the everlasting bliss that they sought,
 to prove the good worthy (Johnson, 2010, 19: 89-96).

Aspects of this passage which may have rankled Goodman included buying salvation through Jesus' blood, earning entrance to heaven through good works, and repetition of references to blood in the text. In lines 89-93, Jesus ransomed humanity by offering His fresh blood to his father. *The Ascension's* association with medieval Catholic tradition of remission of sin through indulgences, that is, prayers, deeds, and alms which brought about expiation of sin, may have caused such an affront. Moreover, Jesus mentions the "good works" of humanity in lines 94-95. The concept of salvation by faith rather than by works is inherent in Protestant theology. Finally, Goodman may have found that the numerous sanguineous references overemphasized the gore in this heavenly scene. In fact, the word "blood" is mentioned five times, "drops" three times, and the color red or "wine" four times in *The Ascension* (Johnson, 2010, 19: 59, 74, 79, 81, 85, 89, and 102). Furthermore, John Sebastian, early modern specialist who collaborated on *The Ascension*, noted the angels' surprise at the fresh blood on Jesus' clothing. To accentuate place, that is, the repetitive device, the angels exclaimed, rather than sang, two lines of the song in the Toronto performance. Thus, blood became the central image of the production. While the beauty of the devotional poetry magnified the potency of *The Ascension*, the shocking imagery prompted research into Medieval, Proto- and Renaissance hagiography, which, in turn, influenced aesthetic considerations in direction and design. In sum, blood became a politically-charged symbol that defined the style of *The Ascension*.

1.3 Costume Design

The anti-Papist sentiment also encouraged a fashionable approach to costume design for *The Ascension*. To further engage with Goodman's Protestant objections, the creative team determined how costume, scenic, and prop design could pose danger to the crown. In the sixteenth-century, satire proved to be an effective mode of expression in an era of censorship. For example, Wilson (1969) suspected that the anonymous sixteenth-century play, the *Godly Queen Hester*, satirized Thomas Wolsey, the Cardinal of York, as the evil councilor in 1527. Following this precedent, allegorical costuming became an instrument of political protest. This approach wittingly departed from Meg Twycross' description of "loose robes" with "fashionable fastenings" (1985, p. 109). Instead, this figurative approach anticipated the Protestant divine's reaction by exchanging woolens for sixteenth-century fashion. Several reasons informed this alternative design. The Chester Guilds were responsible to design their own set and costumes. Firstly, the Tailor's Guild owned the rights to *The Ascension* script. This guild could not only afford quality fabric, but also had sufficient skill to implement stylish designs for the characters. Secondly, Mitchell (2010) noted that Catholics bought church vestments to prepare for another shift from one religion to the next in times of political flux. Thirdly, because lords and ladies customarily gave costumes to actors, wealthy laity may have donated religious costumes to characters in the Cycle. To wit, Wilson (1969) noted that the 3rd Earl of Sussex patronized a troupe of court players, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, in the 1560s and 1570s. Finally, Richardson and Johnston (1991) noted that the Tailor's Guild was the richest of Chester's guilds; therefore, the Guild could afford expensive fabric. These period practices provided rationale to conceive of and construct elegant costumes for *The Ascension's* high ranking characters.

The visual allegory conveyed the peril with which the 1572 Chester pageant was fraught. Set against the backdrop of post-Reformation England, the actors in the 2010 *Ascension* production sported costumes reminiscent of prominent Catholics:

- The actor who played Peter and Andrew wore costumes pieces that linked him to Pope Pius V, who excommunicated Queen Elizabeth in 1570 (Barlow, 1681).
- The actor who portrayed Phillip was dressed as Thomas Cranmer, the equivocating Archbishop of Canterbury (Jokinen, 2011).
- The actor who played John and James wore a costume similar to Phillip II, King of Spain and husband to Mary I, the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon (Synge, 2011).

Not unlike the woodcut by Frans Porbus (1571), in which royalty of the court of Charles IX of France was cast as *commedia dell'arte* characters, the creative team dressed each character in *The Ascension* as a politically dangerous, Catholic personage.

The political symbolism even extended to the angels. In traditional presentations of the Cycle plays, angels were dressed according to the nine hierarchies of angelic rank. Inspired by Twycross' research on the "feathers" of medieval angels (Twycross, 1985, p. 111), Alonso designed white and tea-died feathers on the panels of the angels' dresses and the sleeves. In this visual send-up, the first angel dressed as Mary, Queen of Scots and the second angel dressed as Mary I. Significantly, the angels' costumes reflected the pro-Catholic period of the 1530s. Theresa Coletti's references to Queen Elizabeth as a "saintly whore" and "virgin queen" further influenced the final development (Coletti, 2004, p. 231); however, care was taken to avoid garish accoutrements so as not to allude to the Damned Queen in the Chester Cycle's *The Last Judgment*. Furthermore, to provoke Goodman's fear of "peril and danger to the crown," the first angel, as Mary, Queen of Scots, developed gestures aligned with Magdalene. The second angel, as Mary I, expressed maternal gestures reminiscent of the Virgin Mary. (Fig. 2). This imagistic parody of the Protestant "Bess" served up subliminal messages that braved Anglican royalty. By portraying characters in costumes from England's Catholic glory days, rather than Elizabethan or Biblical costumes, *The Ascension* flaunted the Chester Cycle's allegiance to the former Catholic monarchs; thus, fashion in action revealed the subtle allegory in *The Ascension*.

Satire indirectly expressed politically incorrect beliefs in symbolic uses of blood which reinforced Jesus' profuse exsanguinations. For example, a six foot train of elegant red silk flowed from the red satin loincloth as Jesus hung suspended in midair on a human cross. (Fig. 3). "*Data est mihi omnis potestas in caelo et in terra*" [*All power is given to me in heaven and in earth*].) To compliment the figurative costuming, makeup and props supported Sebastian's theory that the primary offense of *The Ascension* lay in its excessively gruesome references. Consequently, makeup designer Adam Alonso designed realistic makeup to represent stigmata on Christ's hands, feet, and side. Whereas the 1572 production probably pumped blood on cue from a pig's bladder, prop mistress Laura Friedman symbolized blood with fragrant rose petals that spurted from the wound on Jesus' side (Richardson and Johnston, 1991). Tossed from the pageant wagon, the red rose petals exuded a perfume that surprised the audience with its pleasant olfactory effect. The contrasting atmospheres of symbolic props and realistic makeup flew in the face of Protestant tradition. In this way, *The Ascension* team strove to incur Goodman's wrath by designing costumes and props in this distinctly Catholic style.

1.4 Acting Style

Religious and political events shaped the 2010 recreation of the 1572 Chester Cycle. Owing to the political upheaval which profoundly affected London's citizens, the Elizabethan audience would have expected a dynamic theatrical form. Firstly, suspense and surprise were necessary ingredients to engage the Elizabethan audience. The martyrdom of hundreds of Catholics by Mary, Queen of Scots may have led to a need for a more sensational approach to theater. Secondly, Kent Cartwright (1999) noted that "affective, psychological dramaturgy" characterized Tudor drama; indeed, Cartwright identified "fantasy," "spectacle," and "time-related devices such as anticipation, retrospection, and expansion or compression of psychological effects" as characteristics that aroused the Elizabethan audience (p. 100). In fact, investigation of the dramatic strategies of suspense and surprise in *The Ascension* revealed Jesus' reluctance to leave his disciples as well as his urgency to rise to heaven. For example, Jesus surprised his flock with his abrupt appearance at the opening of the play, and then he reassured his flock, "*nolite timere*" [do not be afraid] (Johnson, 2010, 19:1.) (Fig. 4). Christine Richardson and Jackie Johnston (1991) agreed that "suspense" was a salient characteristic of Tudor drama (pp. 102-103). To that end, it is notable that Jesus delayed his departure twice as he spoke eighty-nine of the one hundred and forty-five-lines of the play's text. To juxtapose urgency and delay in Jesus' monologues, Sudden and Sustained movement qualities (Laban and Lawrence, 1974) were integrated in rehearsal. (Fig. 5).

Although the exaggeration of abrupt and continuous movement heightened performance, the way in which the actors moved affected diverse audiences differently. Whereas suddenness engaged the New Orleans audience in the preview, sustained actions added suspense in the Toronto show. Thus, manipulation of timing not only contributed to lasting interest in the Elizabethan era, but also engaged the contemporary audience in the Chester Cycle 2010.

1.5 Enaction - Image and Imagination

While rhythmic and visual techniques affected the theatricality of *The Ascension*, the most significant aspect of *The Ascension* was the rehearsal method of Enaction: Image and Imagination. To encourage the ensemble to taste the spiritual essence of *The Ascension*, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius served as a guidepost. As the cast explored Ignatian spirituality, their ethnic and religious backgrounds enriched the diverse approach to the text. Although a detailed examination of the *Spiritual Exercises* is beyond the scope of this article, the salient points of Ignatian prayer will be discussed; but first, the reason for the exploration of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a rehearsal strategy will be addressed.

Why should Ignatian prayer be incorporated in rehearsal a medieval mystery play? Ignatius discovered a four-week process through which the aspirant moves from self-love to suffering others. In a review of Glenn W. Olsen's book, Marjorie Haney Schafer (2004) suggested that prayer may be considered as a dramatic dialogue with "God is the playwright," "man is the actor" and "Christ is an actor and the director." Interaction between the heavenly and divine personages was the goal in *The Ascension*. Moreover, Pinard De La Boullaye (1909) considered that "...liturgy will become a routine and formalistic drama" without mental prayer. Ignatius' contemplation of thoughts, images and the spoken word, lent itself to imaginative and imagistic acting in *The Ascension*. Thirdly, Frank Paul Bowman (2011), renowned specialist in French literature, noted that even as the ninth century yielded devotional manuals for the laity, "hagiography and liturgically-inspired iconography probably played a more important role until the thirteenth- and fourteenth-centuries." As a result, the actors' embodiment of visual icons added value the Tudor audience's experience of the Cycles. Finally, the Council of Trent, which addressed Protestant heresy between 1545 and 1563, and the death of Ignatius of Loyola in 1556, contributed significantly to the decline of the Counter-Reformation. Because the Chester Cycle in 1572 represented the penultimate effort to stage the mystery cycle before the plays were banned, the contemporary production of *The Ascension* prominently displayed its Catholicism. For these reasons, the Ignatian prayer as a rehearsal method underlined of *The Ascension's* message.

Integration of words and images became intrinsic to *The Ascension* rehearsal process. In Ignatian Spirituality (2011), the balance between intellect and emotion is considered to be the key to the *Exercises*, because "contemplation often stirs the emotions and enkindles deep desires." Through the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola (1919) suggested that participants "meditate on sin and its consequences," "contemplate our Lord Jesus Christ," "call all men to follow Him," contemplate the Passion," and "contemplate the risen and glorified life of our Lord" (p. xxxii). These themes were integrated into *The Ascension* with particular attention to reflection on Christ's resurrection and his appearance to the disciples. The Ignatian prayer method consisted of:

1. Reading daily scripture from the United States Conference on Catholic Bishops
2. Viewing the scene in the mind's eye as a spectator
3. Listening to a second reading of the scripture
4. Entering the scene in an imagined role

To illustrate the impact of the Ignatian prayer on rehearsal, actor James McBride (2010) wrote:

a ritualized activity [...] clears the air[...] In the Christian faith, traditionally we begin any service with a call to worship [...] this mental trigger indicates we are entering into a special time and allows all thought to be focused on the task of worship [...] our readings did the same for our rehearsal process.

The new technique of Enaction: Image and Imagination adapted Ignatian prayer in the following ways. As the actors envisioned events during readings of the scriptures, the actors freely improvised any role from the Biblical reading. After rehearsal, actors recorded their observations and perceptions in journal entries. The Enaction – Image and Imagination technique synthesizes action and reflection to develop compassion for others.

To prepare for this production, the Lenten prayer retreat offered insights into how Ignatian prayer might guide a participant to transcend the ego.

Ignatius of Loyola described the process of purgation and discernment: "...to go for a walk; to take a journey... to run, are bodily exercises, so in like manner all methods of preparing and deposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate affections..." (p. 4). Judy Deshotel (2010), director of the Loyola Lenten retreat, suggested: "When something grabs your attention, stay with it until the moment is passed." In improvisation, actors let go of affectation by focusing on non-verbal gesture, forms of speech or concrete objects inspired by the daily reading. Imaginative interaction with Biblical images enriched characterization.

To further enhance the emotional connectivity between the actors, dramatic events from Jesus' life such as Jesus, his disciples and a woman washing feet were enacted in rehearsals (pp. 173-174). Based on the *Gospel of Saint Luke* (7:36-50), cast members anointed Jesus' feet with scented oil; the actors had the option of washing his feet with tears and drying his feet with hair like the sinner at Simon's house. Andrew Chau who portrayed Jesus reacted strongly:

Christ would have wanted, and would have joyfully washed all of the disciple's feet...to have the true creations of God, humanity, anoint his feet, wash his feet with their tears and to dry them with their hair...Christ had a hard time accepting this...although his place was 'higher' [than] theirs, he never thought of himself in that position...his duty was to serve and love.

After this rehearsal, the actors reported feelings of vulnerable and the cast developed a sense of intimacy. Sensual awareness combined with the text added a visceral element.

The apostles formed new relationships with Jesus in a shepherding exercise. The actor playing Jesus tended his flock with a shepherd's crook. Initially, the sheep climbed on furniture or crawled toward walls. However, as an Israeli shepherd leads, rather than herds, the flock, the apostles and angels eventually followed Jesus. When a sheep was in trouble, other sheep made a "bah-ing" sound to notify the shepherd; consequently, the shepherd retrieved the stray sheep. Actress Sarah Gudan (2010) felt 'cared for with love and attention.' She wanted Jesus to "clean her wool, feet, and teeth" and "watch over and protect her." Although actor Adam Alonso (2010) "liked the feeling of being groomed," he was "content being away from the flock in own little world." In a light-hearted moment, the actors' bleated the song from *The Ascension* in Latin! This exercise set the stage for Jesus' departure; his gentle guidance built *élan* among the apostles.

Not all rehearsal practices were tender. Based on images from medieval English torture (Fox, 2010), actors placed Jesus and gently pull on the long bones of Jesus' limbs on an imaginary rack. Moreover, when an actor was tardy, the actor was stoned with pillows. One actor expressed the value of placing himself in the role of the rabble and the soldiers. By throwing imaginary stones, the actors experienced Jesus' position and developed compassion for his persecutors. This experience connected the actors with the Jesus' suffering. (Fig. 6). Prior to these experiences, actors knelt, stood or sat in response to scripture. As a result these torments, the actors incorporated hanging on the cross in their improvisation.

1.6 Renaissance and Medieval Visual Sources

Since the medieval drama was to be performed on a pageant wagon, a series of sacred medieval and Italian Renaissance tableaux portrayed by the actors' bodies served as the scenic design. Kroll (1985) had advanced the theory that artistic representation inextricably linked form and content. In her close reading of the *Fall of Lucifer*, Kroll found that whereas the action of York was "mental," the action of Chester was "physical"; she concluded that "the Chester characters' deeds are defined by images of their bodily forms in ways that make them surprisingly human" (p. 34-35). Based on this observation, period characterization warranted a physical approach. When the actors improvised, they discovered their character's *gestus*. Bertolt Brecht (1949) used this Latin term for a physical and facial gesture that summed up the character. After the improvisation, actors replicated posture and gestures, which were sketched and blocked into the production. Actor Tyler Yee (2010) discovered his character's *gestus* and experienced synergistic connectivity with the actor portraying Jesus:

This chemistry was nonetheless spiritual, almost as though a fishing line was attached between Andrew and me. We would perform physical gestures at the exact same time for no reason, fueled souly [sic] by entering the scene of the Biblical passage being read aloud. I was reacting on a subconscious level. The essence of the characters' relationship began to quickly manifest in the space between us.

While careful historical and performative analysis sparked the origins of this project, the Ignatian prayer method inspired the interrelationality of the play.

To coin its sixteenth-century look, *The Ascension* portrayed images of medieval, Proto-Renaissance and Renaissance paintings and sculpture. From these explorations, a pictorial concept of *The Ascension* emerged. Catholic iconography shaped the through-line of the design. Given the Protestant dominion over England, the Chester Cycle was considered heretical. Following the Dissolution of 1547, Twycross reported that crosses were taken down and churches whitewashed; however, she did include “Christian art – stained glass windows, carvings, paintings [...] illustrated Bibles, lives of the Saints” in her costume design for the 1980s Cycle (pp. 102-103). For the 2010 production, Giotto di Bondone’s panels on the lives of Christ, Saints John the Evangelist, Francis, Joachim, as well as the Virgin Mary, contributed to the staging. In addition, Donatello, Lotto, Michelangelo, Piero della Francesca, Raphael, and Titian informed the imagistic sequence. To creating a contrasting atmosphere, European painters including Pieter Brueghel the Elder, El Greco, and Peter Paul Rubens served as a counterpoint. With respect to the English origin of the Chester Cycle, the angels modeled their postures after *St. Mary Magdalene* (Coletti, 2004) and *St. Anne* (Coletti, 2004) from rood screens in Norfolk churches (Coletti, 2004), the Flemish triptych of *The Annunciation to Mary* (Campin, 1427-1432), a German statue of *The Visitation of Mary Elizabeth* (Anonymous), an altarpiece of the *Angels Announcing the Passion* (Minden, 1410), and the painting of *Joseph’s Doubt* (McMurray, 1989). Poignantly, Kumbach’s *The Ascension of Christ* (1513) inspired the final tableau of Christ’s feet dangling from the clouds (Fig. 7). The period artwork authenticated the Northern European look of the contemporary *Ascension*.

1.7 Human Scenic Design

In the 2010 production, sometimes, the actors could choose their roles in the painting; at other times, the actors were assigned positions in the tableaux. By suiting period images to medieval text, a synergistic rapport developed between the scenes and tableaux. Yee (2010) described this rehearsal process as “a perfect illustration of the relationship [...] Everyone had their own individual gestures unique to their character but would drop them in order to come together and create a beautiful iconic image. In the *mise en scene*, spatial relationships in context enhanced the textual significance. Catholic images figured prominently in the human set design of as the actors’ bodies became living canvas.

The sixteenth-century Chester text does not specify how Jesus ascended. Richardson and Johnston (1991) suggested that a “swing” or “ladder with prop clouds” [as in the York Cycle] could have been used. Because Jesus had two false exits prior to his final ascension, the cast explored mechanical methods to make Jesus rise. Initially, Jesus warned, “to Heaven I must stee” (Johnson, 2010, 19: 44). The stage directions stated, “Then Jesus shall ascend, and in the course of ascending he shall sing” and he sang “*ascendo*” (Johnson, 2010, 19: 56). Then, the subsequent stage directions required that Jesus remain in their presence as if suspended: “When, however, Jesus has fully sung the hymn, he shall stand in the midst, as if above the clouds, and the Greater Angel shall speak to the Lesser Angel.” (Fig. 6.) The final stage directions stated: “he shall ascend, and in the course of ascending the angels shall sing” (Johnson, 2010, 19: 104). The actors became clouds and a stairway to heaven to fulfill image of Christ ascending “*in medio quasi supra nubs*” [in the midst, as if above the clouds] (Johnson, 2010, 19: 56). Jesus ascended in three ways. Firstly, the choir’s bodies concealed Jesus’ feet by moving from pose to pose as if they were clouds as he walked up the stairway towards the God Above platform adjacent to the pageant wagon. Secondly, apostles held onto Jesus’ legs to lift him into a hanging cross. Thirdly, the apostles formed a human stairway as Jesus, with his red train flowing, stepped from knee to hand onto the God Above structure.

This final device for returning to heaven was derived from a pool rehearsal. To understanding of the divinity of Christ, the cast experienced the cycle of incarnation and ascension in a pool. Through submersion, the actors explored Jesus’ *Harrowing of Hell*, the sixteenth play in the Chester Cycle. In her master class, Nancy Krebs (2010) introduced the concept of rising linked with the buoyancy experiments of voice teacher Arthur Lessac. The cast rose and sank in diverse tempi. Finally, the cast experimented with ways for Jesus and Peter to walk on water. The progression from knee to hand led to walking on water in the pool. This human ladder became the penultimate moment of Jesus’ final ascension. (Fig. 9, Fig. 10, and Fig. 11). Thus, Jesus’ ascension invoked suspenseful and surprising actions that characterized Tudor drama.

1.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, the inimitable blend of research, reading, prayer, reflection, imagination, and improvisation in *The Ascension* united intellect and emotion to produce an authentic and reverential approach to the work. In-depth research on characters and the Chester Cycle script led to an unexpected and intuitive journey informed by medieval and Renaissance script and imagery that revived the Catholic spirit of the Chester Cycle. Through awareness of the senses, a visceral continuum between the physical and the spiritual became palpable in the *mise en scene*. Movement qualities of suspense and sustainment empowered the Chester Cycle to rise to the heightened stakes of this watershed moment in English religious history; however, the key element in Loyola's production was the Ignatian prayer method as a rehearsal technique. By tracing the physical score from text to imagination to improvisation to image, the actors' personal styles dissolved and Elizabethan characters emerged; accordingly, the dramatic action of the script experienced from the point of view of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* resulted in characters that lived for each other in the manner that Jesus commanded. Finally, the Ignatian prayer method as a rehearsal strategy allows for informed speculation about the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual experience of a guildsman performing in the Chester Cycle. In sum, Enaction - Image and Imagination incorporated scholarly research, imagery and improvisation in a replicable methodology for spiritual and communal performance of the mystery plays.

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Figures

Fig. 1. “Know that ye not may” in rehearsal in Toronto. From L to R: Adam Alonso, Tyler Yee, Andrew Chau, Laura Friedman, and James McBride. Photo credit: John Sebastian.

Fig. 2. “Now may we believe it no leasing” in performance at Loyola University New Orleans. Cast from L to R: Adam Alonso, Sarah Gudan, Andrew Chau [behind] and Laura Friedman. Photo credit: John Sebastian.

Fig. 3. “*Data est mihi omnis potestas in caelo et in terra*” [All power is given to me in heaven and in earth] in rehearsal in Toronto. Cast from L to R: Tyler Yee James McBride, and Andrew Chau. Photo credit: John Sebastian.

Fig. 4. “*Nolite timere*” [Do not be afraid] in performance at the Chester Cycle 2010. Cast from L to R: Andrew Chau, Laura Friedman, Adam Alonso, James McBride, and Tyler Yee. Photo credit: John Sebastian.

Fig. 5. “Redeemer called I am” in performance at the Chester Cycle 2010 in Toronto. Cast from L to R: James McBride, Adam Alonso, Andrew Chau, Laura Friedman, and Tyler Yee. Photo credit: John Sebastian.

Fig. 6. “Damned shall be for evermore” in rehearsal in Toronto. Cast from L to R: Tyler Yee, Andrew Chau, James McBride, and Laura Friedman. Photo credit: John Sebastian.

Fig. 7. “He proves his deity” in performance at the Chester Cycle 2010. Cast from L to R: James McBride, Tyler Yee, Laura Friedman, Andrew Chau, and Adam Alonso. Photo credit: John Sebastian.

Fig. 8. “*in medio quasi supra nubs*” [in the midst, as if above the clouds] in performance at Chester Cycle 2010. Cast from L to R: Tyler Yee, Adam Alonso, Andrew Chau, Laura Friedman, and James McBride. Photo credit: John Sebastian.

Fig. 9. The coaching of the final ascension on the pageant wagon in rehearsal in Toronto. From L to R: Andrew Chau, Tyler Yee, James McBride, and Adam Alonso. Photo credit: John Sebastian.

Fig. 10. The knee to hand process of ascension in rehearsal in Toronto. From L to R: James McBride, Andrew Chau, Adam Alonso [behind], and Tyler Yee. Photo credit: John Sebastian.

Fig. 11. The final ascension on the pageant wagon in performance at Chester Cycle 2010. Cast from L to R: James McBride, Andrew Chau, Adam Alonso, Laura Friedman, and Tyler Yee. Photo credit: John Sebastian.