

TIBOR FABINY

## The Apocalyptic Tradition in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature

Apart from the Passion Story, the Apocalypse, or the Book of Revelation was perhaps the most important biblical influence in Medieval and Renaissance English literature. As early as in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye wrote that Revelation is “our grammar of apocalyptic imagery,” which combines and unifies the most significant symbols of the Western literary tradition.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will provide an inventory of the most significant apocalyptic works and their authors from the Medieval and Early Modern periods.

### *The Middle Ages*

#### The Vision of Piers Plowman

In Middle English literature there are several literary documents of apocalyptic spirituality. Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), with his trinitarian view of history and his prophetic imagination, has most probably influenced apocalyptic literary works. John Wycliff and the 14th century Lollards criticized the corruption of the clergy and wanted to return to the simplicity of the early church. The most popular 14th century poem was a Lollard work: *The Vision of Piers Plowman*. A candidate for the authorship is a certain William Langland, of whom we do not know too much. The theme of the poem is the pilgrimage of man’s soul in search of the ultimate truth. The allegorical poem also provides the reader with a realistic image of 14th century England.

*Piers Plowman* exists in three different manuscripts and was written during the “alliterative revival.” It has been called a “Fourteenth Century Apocalypse.”<sup>2</sup> The poem is written within the dream-vision tradition: the poet falls asleep on Malvern Hills and in his dream he sees a large field “full of folk.” On this field he sees the Tower of Truth and the Dungeon of Falsehood and the crowd of people running after vanities. Pilgrims, palmers and pardoners are among the corrupt people. It is described how the Devil, the Father of Lies fell from heaven. When the dreamer asks Holy Church how he may recognize Falsehood, she then shows him how Lady

<sup>1</sup> Northrop FRYE: *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, 141.

<sup>2</sup> Morton W. BLOOMFIELD, “‘Piers Plowman’ as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse”. *Centennial Review*, 1961. 281–295.

Fee, Falsehood's daughter marries Fraud. The he dreams of the Seven Deadly Sins. The only positive hero in this dreamworld is Piers the Plowman, whose plainness and simplicity makes him a type of Christ. In fact, in the dream Piers becomes identified with Christ when the dreamer envisages the founding of the Holy Church. In the last book (Passus XX), the dreamer has a vision of the Antichrist:

When Need has scolded me so I fell asleep at once  
 And dreamed most marvellously that in man's form  
 Antichrist came then and cut Truth's branches,  
 Quickly turned the tree upside down and tore up the roots,  
 And made False spring up and spread and support men's needs.  
 In every country where he came he cut away Truth  
 And got Guile to grow there as if he were a god.  
 Friars followed that fiend, for he gave them copes,  
 And religious orders did him reverence and rang their bells,  
 And all the convent came to welcome a usurper  
 And all his followers as well as him, save only fools,  
 Which fools would prefer far more to die  
 Than to live any longer since Lewte was so despised,  
 And a false fiend Antichrist put all folk beneath his rule.

(Trans. E.T. Donaldson)

In the last pages of the poem the vivid battle against Antichrist is described in great detail.

### Pearl

*Pearl* is perhaps the most beautiful poem in Middle English literature, therefore, it deserves closer attention. The poem was preserved in a collection with three other famous Middle English poems, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Patience*, and *Purity (Cleanness)*, and was written during the alliterative revival at the end of the 14th century in the North West Midland dialect. The author is unknown.

*Pearl* contains 101 rhymed octosyllabic 12-line stanzas in 20 "chapters." There are 1212 lines altogether in the poem, the rhyme scheme is *abab abab bcbc*, the stanzas are knit together by a final refrain.

This poem was also written within the "dream vision convention" like *The Dream of the Rood*, *La Roman de la Rose*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *Piers Plowman*, Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, and so on. In this tradition the dream was seen as medium for utterance of serious religious matters.

The sources of the poem come partly from the medieval romance tradition: the Virgin Mary is called the "Queen of Courtesy" in stanza 37. But the most important

source is the Christian Bible: there are altogether 99 biblical quotations, mainly from the Book of Revelation.<sup>3</sup> Structurally there are reminiscences of the parable of the Pearl (Mt 13:45–46) or parable of the Lost Coin Lk 15:8–9).

The subject of *Pearl* is very simple: Pearl is the author's daughter, an only child whom he lost when she was less than two years old. Wandering disconsolate in the garden where she is buried, the author falls asleep and has a vision of a river beyond which lies Paradise. Here he sees a maiden seated, in whom he recognizes his daughter grown to maturity. She, however, comforts him for his excessive grief and explains her blessed state. He strives to join her and plunges into the river, and awakes from his trance, comforted and resigned to his lot.

The artistic merits of the poem lie both in its aesthetic and religious values. There is a strict harmony between passionate grief and lofty moral vision (mystical experience). The child (just as Dante's Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*) instructs the father in heavenly wisdom and sacred theology and she even shows him a vision of heaven. Pearl is beauty "without a spot" (or "spotless Pearl"): her beauty radiates the heavenly world of Apocalypse which is entirely different from worldly or earthly beauty.

The central motif of the whole poem is the "marriage of the Lamb" as it is described in Rev 19:8–7, cf. l.163 (14) and l:197 (17) 413–17 (35!):

for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife has made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints.

The father is instructed by his heavenly daughter to submit to God's will. When he says how much he is puzzled that his daughter who died so young can be the "Queen of Heaven," Pearl answers her father's question by citing the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1–16), suggesting that it means that a person who died as young as she can enter first the Kingdom of God. Moreover, Jesus insisted on a child-like quality in those who enter the Kingdom (50–62).

In the rest of the conversation Pearl evokes the world of apocalypse to her father. The poet cannot understand why Pearl is alone the bride of Christ. Pearl says she is one of the many brides described in the Apocalypse (63–66). The poet is asking Pearl:

O spotless pearl in pearls so pure...  
Who formed for thee thy fair figure?  
Who wrought thy raiment was full wise.  
Thy beauty was never born of nature (63)

<sup>3</sup> E. V. GORDON (ed.): *Pearl*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1953, 164–165.

The answer is:

O spotless Lamb who doth defeat  
 All ills, my dearest Destiny  
 Chose me His mate, although unmeet  
 At first had seemed that unity  
 From the world of woe I did retreat.  
 He called me to His company:  
 ‘Come hither to me, my beloved sweet,  
 There is no mote nor spot in thee.’  
 Might and beauty He gave to me.  
 In His blood He rinsed my robes before  
 He crowned me clean in virginity,  
 Adorning me in pearls so pure (64)

This was a reference to Rev 7:10–15: “Which are these [...] that are arrayed in white robes and whence came they? These are they that came out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Pearl explains that she is one of the wives of the 140.000:

All wives of the Lamb in bliss we have been  
 A hundred and forty thousand lot,  
 As in the Apocalypse it is seen.  
 St John saw them gathered all in a knot,  
 On the hill of Sion, that seemly spot.  
 The Apostle saw them, in his vision’s dream,  
 Arrayed for the wedding on that hill top,  
 The fair new city, Jerusalem (66)

Here the reference was to Rev 14:1–4:

And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood with him on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his father’s name written in their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. These are they which were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb withersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb.

Pearl then proceeds to extol the meekness of the Lamb (67), and then the Passion is described with reference to Isaiah 53:

Like sheep to a slaughter led was He,  
 And like lambs when the shearer seizes them,  
 So He closed His mouth from each inquiry,  
 When the Jews judged Him in Jerusalem (67)

Pearl describes the bliss in the world of the New Jerusalem (71–75). The poet wants to see the New Jerusalem and Pearl therefore guides him there so that he could see it himself (81). Pearl warns him that only the pure can set foot in it. Enraptured by sight, the poet describes the New Jerusalem in detail based on Rev 21:83–91. The poet becomes aware of a procession of heavenly maidens led by the Lamb (92–93). Elders do honour to the Lamb while the song of heaven is sung (94). Then the poet contemplates the bleeding wound of Christ and adores the Lamb:

Delight in the Lamb, in looking on him,  
 Filled with marvel my mind amazed.  
 Best was he, gentlest and most to esteem  
 Of all the high ones I ever heard praised.  
 Most meek and courteous was his mien,  
 Although his garments were gloriously white.  
 But close to his heart, torn through the skin,  
 Was a cruel wound, bleeding and wide:  
 The blood gushed out of his body's white.  
 Alas, thought I, who did that spite?  
 For sorrow the breast should burn up quite  
 That in such torment could take delight. (95)

The poet sees his own Pearl among the maidens (96), and, frenzied with longing, resolves to go to her, though the attempt would bring death (97). God breaks the vision, the poet awakes in awe (98–99). He resolves to follow God as Pearl had advised and in the calm of mind submitting to the will of God prays that he would deserve the blessed life. Here ends this cathartic poem.

### John Gower

John Gower (1330–1408) was a late 14th century poet, Geoffrey Chaucer's friend and contemporary, the "moral Gower" who wrote in three languages: French, Latin and English. *Speculum Hominis* or *Mirour de l'Omme* is a long commentary on the dilemma of the fallen man. The highly apocalyptic Latin poem *Vox Clamantis*

discusses the evils in society, with man as the microcosm in which the sins of the world are abundantly exhibited. Finally, the English *Confessio Amantis* was meant for entertainment, but in the Prologue Gower cannot descend from the pulpit: he discusses the corruption of the world, the decay of the age, and the coming destruction based on Nebuchadnezzar's dream from the book of Daniel.

### The Mystery Plays

Last but not least we should mention the mystery plays or the Corpus Christi cycles. These cycles covered the history of redemption from Genesis to Doomsday. Each cycle contained a drama on Judgement Day. There is an Antichrist-play in the Chester-cycle and the figure of the Antichrist also appears in the 14th poem *Cursor Mundi*.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Early Modern Period*

#### John Bale and the Tudor Apocalypse

The English Renaissance was preceded by the Reformation in England. English reformers shared the apocalyptic mentality of their continental counterparts. Apocalypse became a Tudor genre as demonstrated by Richard Bauckham's *Tudor Apocalypse*, in which he collected the English texts of "The Lantern of Lyght" (1530), Francis Lambert (1528), Sebastian Meyer (1539), George Joye (1545), Bartholomew Traheron (1557), Heinrich Bullinger (1561), William Fulke (1570), John Chardon (1580), and George Gifford (1596).<sup>5</sup> A little German tract *Passional Christi and Antichristi*, illustrated by twenty-six woodcuts from Lucas Cranach (1521), must have been influential on the first English commentary on the Book of Revelation, namely John Bale's *Image of Both Churches* written in the 1540s.<sup>6</sup> The false church was represented by the Roman church, while the true church was the Protestant one. The idea might go back to St. Augustine's distinction between *civitas diaboli* and *civitas dei*, or even to Tyconius's idea of the "bipartite body of Christ" in his *Liber regularum*. Katherine Firth in her excellent book *Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530–1645* suggests that Bale "accepted the Joachimist vision of the Church as a progression through seven periods, from the death of Christ to the end of the

<sup>4</sup> Bernard MCGINN: *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*, New York, Harper Collins, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Richard BAUCKHAM: *Tudor Apocalypse: Sixteenth century apocalypticism, millenarianism and the English Reformation: From John Bale to John Foxe and Thomas Brightman*, Oxford, The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Hildegard SCHNABEL (ed.): *Lucas Cranach: Passional Christi und Antichristi*. Berlin, Union Verlag, 1972.

world.”<sup>7</sup> The main theme of the work was “the slow and secret advance of Antichrist in the Church.”<sup>8</sup>

In his Preface unto the Christian reader Bale says that:

Herein is the true Christian church, which is the meek spouse of the Lamb without spot, in her right-fashioned colours described. So is the proud church of hypocrites, the rose-coloured whore, the paramour of antichrist, and the sinful sinagogue of Satan, in her just proportion depainted, to the merciful forewarning of the Lord’s elect. And that is the cause why I have here entitled this book *The Image of Both Churches* [...] He that knoweth not this book, knoweth not what the true church is whereof he is a member. For herein is the estate thereof from Christ’s ascension to the end of the world under pleasant figures and elegant tropes decided, and nowhere else thoroughly but here, the times always respected.<sup>9</sup>

### Robert Crowley

Bale’s commentary also influenced the Tudor Gospeller Robert Crowley, who published a contemporary version of *Piers Plowman* around 1550. The work had a strong anticlerical tone and advocated the simplicity of Christ. Crowley respected the original text, but by his preface and marginal glosses converted the Middle English work into Protestant propaganda.<sup>10</sup> Crowley even added a companion entitled *The Voyce of the Laste Trumpet*, in which he advocated Bale’s theory, namely that the reign of Edward VI marks the advent of the millennium.<sup>11</sup>

### Jan Van der Noodt

Apocalyptic mentality was also reflected in emblem literature. The first English emblem book is the work of the Dutchman Jan Van der Noodt, and its title is *The*

<sup>7</sup> Katherine FIRTH: *Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530–1645*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Katherine FIRTH: *op. cit.* 50.

<sup>9</sup> John BALE: *The Image of Both Churches*, London, 1545, reprint in *Select Works of John Bale*, ed. for the Parker Society by Rev. Henry CHRISTMAS, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1849. On Bale’s reception see Bauckham, Firth, and King, as well as Paul Kenneth CHRISTIANSON: *Reformers and Babylon: English Apocalyptic Visions from the Reformation to the Eve of the Civil War*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1978, and Claire MCEACHERN: “‘A whore at the first blush seemeth only a woman’: John Bale’s *Image of Both Churches* and the terms of religious difference in the early English Reformation”. *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 25, 2, 1995. 245–269.

<sup>10</sup> John KING: *English Reformation Literature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982, 327.

<sup>11</sup> John KING: *op. cit.* 342.

*Theatre of Voluptuous Worldlings*, published in London in 1569. There are twenty plates in the book followed by explanatory verses. The first part of the book depicts the ruins of time, while the second part depicts John's Vision of the Apocalypse: it contrasts the corruption of the Roman Catholic church with the spiritual city of God established at the end of time. It is worth comparing Cranach's *Passional Christi und Antichristi* as well as his apocalyptic illustrations to Luther's New Testament of September and December 1525, respectively, as well as John Bale's *Image* and the emblem depicted in Van der Noodt's book. The text attached to this emblem is said to be a "Sonet."

I saw a Woman sitting on a beast  
 Before mine eyes, of Orenge colour hew:  
 Horrour and dreadfull name of blasphemie  
 Filde hir with pride. And Seuen heads I saw,  
 Ten hornes also the stately beast did beare.  
 She seemde with glorie of the scarlet faire,  
 And with fine perle and golde puft up in heart.  
 The wine of hoordome in a cup she bare.  
 The name of Mysterie writ in hir face.  
 The bloud of Martyrs dere were hir delite.  
 Most fierce and fell this woman seemde to me.  
 An Angell then descendinge downe from Heaven,  
 With thondring voice cride out aloude, and sayd,  
 Now for a truth great Babylon is fallen.

### Edmund Spenser

Two of Edmund Spenser's sonnet translations were published in Van der Noodt's book. Edmund Spenser (1552–1599) elaborates the apocalyptic double image of the church in the first book of his *The Fairie Queene*. The hero of the book is the Red Cross Knight who is both the type of Christ as well as an Everyman-figure. Spenser inherited an apocalyptic view of church history from Bale's *Image of Both Churches* (c. 1550) as well as from John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563). Both works were influenced by the *Magdeburg Centurion* written by the Lutheran Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–1575). According to this historiography, "Christian history is a drama of the True Church opposed by the False, Jerusalem by Babylon, the Bride by the Whore."<sup>12</sup> For Protestants in Tudor England the two royal sisters Bloody Mary and Elizabeth epitomized the struggle between the Whore and the Bride.

<sup>12</sup> Florence SANDLER: "The Fairie Queene: an Elizabethan Apocalypse". In C. A. Patrides – Joseph Wittreich (eds.): *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance thought and literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984, 148–173, 158.

Mary's death in 1558 was seen as God's vindication of the new Virgin Queen who is the Apocalyptic Bride, the True Church.

Spenser also shared this dualistic image of the church: Una is the true church who is identified with the woman "clothed with the sun" (Rev 12:1). The false church is Duessa who plays multiplicity to Una's integrity: she is also the Whore of Babylon, the scarlet woman of Revelation 17 and also the church of Rome. Archimago is Antichrist, the beast from the land from Revelation 13, the papacy. Canto VIII describes her as follows:

And after him the proud *Duessa* came,  
High mounted on her manyheaded beast,  
And every head with fyrie tongue did flame,  
And every head was crowned on his creast,  
And bloudie mouthed with late cruell feast. (Stanza 6)

Then tooke the angrie witch her golden cup,  
Which she still bore, replete with magick artes,  
Death and despeyre did many thereof sup,  
And secret poyson through their inner parts,  
Th' eternall bale of heavie wounded harts (Stanza 14)

And there beside of marble stone was built  
An Altare, carv'd with cunning ymagery,  
On which true Christians bloud was often spilt,  
And holy Martyrs often doen to dye,  
With cruell malice and strong tyranny.  
Whose blessed sprites from underneath the stone  
To God for vengeance cryde continually,  
And with great grieve were often heard to grone,  
That hardest heart would bleede, to heare their piteous mone. (Stanza 37)

So as she bad, that witch they disaraid,  
And robd of royall robes, and purple pall,  
And ornaments that richly were displaid,  
Ne spared they strip her naked all.  
Then when they had despoiled her tire and call,  
Such as she was, their eyes might her behold,  
That her misshaped parts did them appall,  
A loathly, wrinkled hag, ill favoured, old,  
Whose secret filth good manners biddeth not to be told. (Stanza 46)

## Bible Translations and the Junius Apocalypse

The 16<sup>th</sup> century is the great age of Bible translations. Before the famous Authorized Version of 1611 we have William Tyndale's New Testament of 1526, which was followed by Miles Coverdale's complete Bible translation in 1535, the Great Bible in 1538, the Geneva Bible ("The Breeches Bible") of 1557, The Bishop's Bible in 1558, Laurence Tomson's revision of the Geneva New Testament in 1576, and the Geneva-Tomson-Junius New Testament of 1602. The latter is significant for our purposes, as it contains the English translation of Francis Junius's commentary on the Book of Revelation. Francis Junius was a Huguenot professor of divinity at the University of Heidelberg, and his extended commentary was first published in English by Richard Field in 1592, entitled: *Apocalypse. A brief and learned commentarie upon the Reuelation of Saint Iohn the Apostle and Euangelist... Written in Latin by M. Francis Iunius, Doctor of Diuinitie [...] And translated into English.*<sup>13</sup>

## William Shakespeare and the Apocalypse

The English Bible translations had a great influence on Shakespeare's imagery, as was demonstrated by the scholarly works of Richmond Noble in the 1930s or in the last ten years by Naseeb Shaheen.<sup>14</sup>

When we come to Shakespeare's use of apocalyptic imagery, we cannot but agree with Frank Kermode, who in his famous *The Sense of an Ending* said as follows: "When tragedy established itself in England it did so in terms of plots and spectacle that had much more to do with medieval apocalypse than with the *mythos* and *opsis* of Aristotle."<sup>15</sup>

Apocalyptic imagery in Shakespeare has been studied especially in *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *King Lear*.<sup>16</sup> The striking presence of evil in these tragedies echoes the Book of Revelation. Macbeth's sentence: "and mine eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of man" (3.1.68–69) is an indirect allusion

<sup>13</sup> Gerald T. SHEPPARD (ed.): *The Geneva Bible (The Annotated New Testament, 1602 Edition)*, New York, The Pilgrim Press, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> Richmond NOBLE: *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge*, London, Macmillan, 1935; Naseeb SHAHEEN: *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Tragedies*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1987; *Biblical References in Shakespeare's History Plays*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1989; *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Comedies*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Frank KERMODE: *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1966, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Mary LASCELLES: "King Lear and Doomsday". *Shakespeare Survey*, 26, 1973. 69–79; Jane H. JACK: "Macbeth, King James and the Bible". *English Literary History*, 22.3, 1955. 173–193; Ethel SEATON: *Antony and Cleopatra and the Book of Revelation*. *The Review of English Studies*, 22.87, 1946. 219–224; Jack LINDSAY: "Antony and Cleopatra and the Book of Revelation". *The Review of English Studies*, 89, 1947. 66; Helen MORRIS: "Shakespeare and Dürer's Apocalypse". *Shakespeare Studies*, 4, 1968. 252–262.

to Rev 12:9, just like Banquo's question "can the devil speak true?" (1.3.107) or the statement "To win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths" (1.3.123–125). Jane Jack is correct when she says that "Shakespeare lent heavily on *Revelation* and James' commentary on it for the expression of his imaginative apprehension of overwhelming evil."<sup>17</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra's* indebtedness to the Book of Revelation is especially striking. It is not only the "new heaven – new earth" motive right at the beginning of the play (1.1.17, cf. Rev 21:1), but especially that Cleopatra appears as the great whore of Babylon: "He hath given his empire / Up to a whore, who are now levying / The kings of the earth for war" (3.6.66–68, cf. Rev 17:1–2, Rev 19:19). Antony is the great star that is fallen (3.13.145–147, cf. Rev 9:1). And "The star is fallen / And time is at his period." (4.14.106–107, cf. Rev 8:10: "There fell a great starre from heauen." Or consider Cleopatra's description of the dead Antony:

His face was as the heav'ns, and therein struck  
A sun and moon, which kept their course, and lighted  
The little O, th' earth. [...]  
His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear'd arm  
Crested the world, his voice was propertied  
As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends (5.2.79–84)

This description is reminiscent of Rev 10:1–5: "And I sawe another mightie Angel come downe from heauen, clothed with a cloude, and the rainbowe vpon his head, and his face was as the sunne, and his feete as pillars of fire."

Naseeb Shaheen is most probably right when he writes that

Shakespeare's use of the book of Revelation in *Antony and Cleopatra* is outstanding. The Apocalypse seems to have supplied him with some of the most vivid images in the play. Since only three chapters of Revelation were read during Morning and Evening Prayer in the Anglican Church (chapter 19 on All Saints Day, November 1, chapters 1 and 22 on the Feast of St. John, December 27) Shakespeare must have read privately much of Revelation shortly before or during the composition of the play.<sup>18</sup>

Joseph Wittreich has written both an article and a whole book on the relationship between Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the Book of Revelation.<sup>19</sup> Undoubtedly,

<sup>17</sup> Jane H. JACK: *op. cit.* 186.

<sup>18</sup> Naseeb SHAHEEN: *Biblical references in Shakespeare's Tragedies*, 176.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph WITTREICH: "'Image of that horror': The Apocalypse in *King Lear*". In C.A. Patrides – Joseph Wittreich (eds.): *The Apocalypse in Renaissance Thought and Literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984, 175–206; *"Image of that Horror": History, Prophecy and Apocalypse in King Lear*, San Marino, The Huntington Library, 1984.

Shakespeare ridicules Gloucester's superstitious belief in astrology: namely, in the "late eclipses in the sun and the moon" the apocalyptic allusions are persuasive throughout the tragedy. The play's last scene's hint at the final judgement: "Is this the promis'd end? / Or the image of that horror" (5.3.263–264) makes the presence of apocalypse quite evident. Wittreich demonstrated that *King Lear* was performed before the King at Whitehall "upon St. Stephen's night" in 1606. Since Shakespeare put the plot of the play into a pre-Christian setting, Cordelia's death could be seen as the prefiguration of the Christian proto-martyr St. Stephen. King James himself was interested in apocalyptic myth: John Napier's *A Plain Discovery of the Whole Revelation of Saint John* (Edinburgh, 1594) was dedicated to him and he himself wrote *A Paraphrase upon the Revelation of the Apostle S. John* published in 1616 and 1619. It is not only the horror and judgement but several other motives that echo the Book of Revelation. The hypocrite daughters Goneril and Regan (both in love with Edmund) might correspond to the great whore. Moreover, there are allusions to the seven stars, cracking thunder, eclipse of the sun and the moon, the black angel, and the wheel of fire, which all evoke the Apocalypse. Lear's remark of the naked Edgar "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" might echo Rev 3:17: "thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind and naked." Cordelia's figure has long been associated with Christ: "O dear father / It is thy business that I go about" (4.4.23–24, cf. Luke 2:49), as she "redeems nature from the natural curse / Which twain have brought her to" (4.6.205–207). The garment-imagery has a crucial function in the drama. The naked and mad Lear when at last in the company of benevolent powers receives a new garment: "We put fresh garments on him" (3.7.23). The new garment or raiment is also an apocalyptic image (Rev 7:13–14): "Blessed is he that watches and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame" (Rev 16:15). In the great reunion of Lear and Cordelia in Act 4 Scene 7 Lear says: "Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not" (4.7.71). In Rev 7:17, we read that "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." In the Book of Revelation, as in *King Lear*, the true and good ones are always tried (or weighed), and even they are found wanting. They (Edgar, Kent) have to hide themselves in order to preserve themselves. Another apocalyptic image is that of the trumpet in *King Lear*. In the last scene, when Edgar, his identity still being hidden, challenges his wicked brother Edmund to a duel, five trumpets are sounded. "Only with the trumpet comes the possibility of the renewal of the world, a resurrection after death."<sup>20</sup> Wittreich's conclusion is interesting: "Apocalyptic reference, besides importing mythic dimensions to this play, also turns the apocalyptic myth against itself in such a way as to challenge received interpretations of it. Like the Lear legend, the myth of apocalypse is first ravaged, then created anew, and this is part of the larger ravaging of Christianity itself."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Joseph WITTRICH: "Image of that horror': the Apocalypse in *King Lear*". 188.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph WITTRICH: "Image of that horror': the Apocalypse in *King Lear*". 192.

**John Donne**

John Donne, the most famous metaphysical poet, devoted most of his mature poetry to religious subjects. It is interesting to observe that the Apocalypse or the Last Judgement occurs rather infrequently within his religious verse; he seems to be more concerned either with the crucial event of Christ's redemptive action, i.e. the passion, or, even more conspicuously, with the drama of his own individual conversion.

Even where the apocalyptic imagery is indeed intense and sharp, his ultimate concern is to learn to properly lament while he is still on earth: Sonnet VII of his *Divine Meditations* evokes Rev 7:1: "After these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth:"

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow  
 Your trumpets, angels and arise, arise  
 From death, you numberless infinities  
 Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go,  
 All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,  
 All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,  
 Despair, law, chance, hath slain, and you whose eyes,  
 Shall Behold God, and never taste death's woe.  
 But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,  
 For, if above all these, my sins abound,  
 'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace,  
 When we are there, here on this lowly ground,  
 Teach me how to repent, for that's as good  
 As if thou hadst sealed my pardon, with thy blood.

**John Milton**

There were two significant 17th century commentaries on the Book of Revelation that Milton studied. David Pareus (1548–1622) was first the Professor of the Old Testament at Heidelberg, then the Professor of the New Testament. He gave lectures on Revelation in 1609 and published them in 1618, shortly before his death. The English translation *A Commentary upon the Divine Revelation of the Apostle and Evangelist John* (published in 1644) was the work of Elias Arnold. The other commentator was Joseph Mede (1586–1638), who was a Fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge while Milton studied there. Mede's famous work was *Clavis apocalyptica* (1627). Both commentators assumed that the world was soon coming to an end.<sup>22</sup> Pareus'

<sup>22</sup> Michael MURRIN: "Revelation and two seventeenth century commentators". In C.A. Patrides – Joseph Wittreich (eds.): *The Apocalypse in Renaissance Thought and Literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984, 125–146.

great invention was to apply literary or aesthetic categories in his discussion of the Book of Revelation. He understood that the book had a dramatic structure and he considered it to be a tragedy. For Pareus, the Book of Revelation contained seven little dramas. Section 6, for example, was the tragedy of Antichrist: Act I. (Ch.17) The whore and the beast, Act II. (Ch.18) The burning of the whore, Act III (Ch.19.1–11) The marriage of the Lamb, Act IV (Ch.19.12–21) Armageddon. Milton in the second book of *The Reason for Church Government* cites Pareus approvingly when he calls Revelation to be a Tragedy: “And the Apocalyps of Saint John is the majestick image of a high and stately Tragedy, shutting up and intermingling her solemn Scenes and Acts with a sevenfold Chorus of halleluja’s and harping symphonies: this my opinion the grave authority of Pareus commenting that booke is sufficient to confirm.”<sup>23</sup> In the Preface to his *Samson Agonistes* (“Of That Sort of Dramatic Poem Which is Called Tragedy”) Milton again mentioned Pareus: “Paraeus commenting on the *Revelation*, divides the whole book as a tragedy, into acts distinguished each by a chorus of heavenly harpings and song between.”<sup>24</sup> In 1627, a decade after Pareus, the millenarist John Alsted also talked about the protasis, epitasis and catastrophe in the drama of the Antichrist. The English translation was published in 1643.<sup>25</sup>

C. A. Patrides says that Milton’s attitude to the Book of Revelation in *Paradise Lost* is but a gesture.<sup>26</sup> He quotes Rev 6:16: “And said to the mountains, and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb,” and finds a corresponding episode in the description of the fight of Satan and Michael in Book 6.643–655 of *Paradise Lost*:<sup>27</sup>

[God’s mighty Angels]  
 From thir foundation loosing to and fro  
 They pluckt the seated Hills with all thir load,  
 Rocks, Waters, Woods, and by the shaggie tops  
 Up lifting bore them in thir hands: Amaze,  
 Be sure, and terrour seis’d the rebel Host,  
 When coming towards them so dread they saw  
 The bottom of the Mountains upward turn’d,  
 Till on those cursed Engins triple-row  
 They saw them whelm’d, and all thir confidence  
 Under the weight of Mountains buried deep,

<sup>23</sup> John MILTON: *Selected Prose*, ed. C. A. Patrides, London, Penguin, 1974, 56.

<sup>24</sup> John MILTON: *The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, London, Longman, 2007, 355.

<sup>25</sup> Michael MURRIN: *op. cit.* 134.

<sup>26</sup> C. A. PATRIDES: “‘Something like a prophetic strain’: Apocalyptic Configurations in Milton”. In C. A. Patrides – Joseph Wittreich: *The Apocalypse in Renaissance Thought and Literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984, 206–237, 231.

<sup>27</sup> John MILTON: *Paradise Lost*, ed. Barbara Lewalski, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007. All quotations from *Paradise Lost* are taken from this edition.

Themselves invaded next, and on thir heads  
Main Promontories flung, which in the Air  
Came shadowing, and oppresst whole Legions armd (6.638–655)

In Book 12, Michael foretells the future of mankind between the first and the second advent: Jesus went to heaven but

thence shall come,  
When this worlds dissolution shall be ripe (12.458–459)

Though Christianity will quickly spread, soon false and superstitious teachers will come who oppress truth. Hypocrites will align themselves with secular power and they will impose spiritual laws on every conscience. The corruption will grow, but this “perverted world” will be “purged” by the Second Coming and the new heaven and new earth will bring about “joy and eternal bliss”:

but in thir room, as they forewarne,  
Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous wolves,  
Who all the sacred mysteries of heav'n  
To thir own vile advantages shall turne  
Of lucre and ambition, and the truth  
With superstitions and traditions taint,  
Left onely in those written Records pure,  
Though not but by the Spirit understood.  
Then shall they seek to avail themselves of names,  
Places and titles, and with these to joine  
Secular power, though feigning still to act  
By spiritual, to themselves appropriating  
The Spirit of God, promis'd alike and giv'n  
To all Beleevers; and from that pretense,  
Spiritual Lawes by carnal power shall force  
On every conscience; Laws which none shall finde  
Left them inrould, or what the spirit within  
Shall on the heart engrave. What will they then  
But force the Spirit of Grace itself, and bind  
His consort Liberty, what but unbuild  
His living temples, built by Faith to stand,  
Thir own faith, not another's: for on earth  
Who against Faith and Conscience can be heard  
Infallible? Yet many will presume:  
Whence heavie persecution shall arise  
On all who in the worship persevere

Of Spirit and Truth; the rest, farr greater part,  
 Will deem in outward Rites and specious formes  
 Religion satisfi'd, Truth shall retire  
 Bestuck with slandrous darts, and works of Faith  
 Rarely be found. So shall the World goe on,  
 To good malignant, to bad men benigne,  
 Under her own waight groaning till the day  
 Appeer of respiration to the just,  
 And vengeance to the wicked, at return  
 Of him so lately promiss'd to thy aid  
 The Womans Seed, obscurely then foretold,  
 Now amplier known thy Saviour and thy Lord,  
 Last in the Clouds from Heav'n to be revealed  
 In glory of the Father, to dissolve  
*Satan* with his perverted World, then raise  
 From the conflagrant mass, purg'd and refin'd,  
 New Heav'ns, new Earth, Ages of endless date  
 Founded in righteousness and peace and love  
 To bring forth fruits Joy and eternal bliss. (12.507–551)

### John Bunyan

We end our survey of apocalyptic motives in Medieval and Renaissance English literature with John Bunyan (1628–1688), whose *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) contains one of the greatest visions of the New Jerusalem. The passage is in the closing pages of the book describing the moment when the pilgrims cross the perilous waters of the River and ascend Mount Zion. The image is clearly inspired by Revelation 21.

The talk that they had with the Shining Ones was about the glory of the place, who told them that the beauty and glory of it was inexpressible. There, said they, is the Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the innumerable company of angels, and the spirits of just men made perfect. You are going now, said they, to the Paradise of God, wherein you shall see the Tree of Life, and eat of the never-fading fruits thereof, and when you come here, you shall have white Robes given you, and your walk and talk shall be every day with the King, even all the days of Eternity.

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### Abstract

*Apart from the Passion Story, the Book of Revelation, or, as it is commonly known, the Apocalypse, was perhaps the most important biblical influence in medieval and Renaissance English literature. In this paper I discuss the most significant Apocalyptic authors and works from these periods.*

**Keywords:** Revelation, Apocalypse, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Bunyan

### Resümé

*Az apokaliptikus hagyomány a középkori és reneszánsz angol irodalomban*

*A Biblia Jézus szenvedéstörténetét bemutató részei mellett a Jelenések könyve, más néven az Apokalipszis fejtette ki a legnagyobb hatást a középkori és reneszánsz angol irodalomra. A tanulmány bemutatja a korszak legjelentősebb Apokalipszis-iblette szerzőit és műveit.*

**Kulcsszavak:** Jelenések könyve, Apokalipszis, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Bunyan