Chapter 5

A Foil and a Forerunner

John the Baptist’s Role

In the gospels, John the Baptist has one main role: forerunner to the Messiah, Jesus. John’s actions may go beyond this, especially in his criticism of Herod, but this role remains the centerpiece of his character. While Burgess, Kazantzakis, and Mailer include this role in their portrayals of John, what each focuses on is John’s life. Instead of simply proclaiming the coming of Jesus, he is also shown to have shaped Jesus’ teaching. In fact, Ricci’s novel shows him as Jesus’ teacher. This change coincides with other “fictional transfigurations” of John, as Theodore Ziolkowski writes, “Equally popular is the figure of John the Baptist, who is sometimes represented as an evangelical figure . . . and sometimes more soberly as the teacher or tutor of the transfigured hero” (279). This development of John’s character leads some critics to see him as a stronger character than Jesus: “The same romanticism which makes John a more vivid figure than Jesus in Rembrandt, Kazantzakis, and ‘Godspell’ makes him a more historical figure than Jesus in much contemporary scholarship, despite the complete lack of evidence deriving directly from John’s own movement” (Chilton 26). Though there is a lack of historical evidence concerning John, another critic observes he “figures prominently in the New Testament, where he is mentioned about ninety times, exclusively in the gospels and in Acts; only Jesus, Peter, and Paul are mentioned more often” (Lienhard 197). However, “what two or all three synoptic gospels relate about John falls easily into three episodes” (Lienhard 197). John’s actions and teachings still lead to a focus on Jesus, but they now take on more meaning as John and Jesus struggle to determine Jesus’ path together.

Though a cult of John the Baptist developed as early as the fourth century (Lienhard 197), there are no significant legends from the early church.
There is evidence of the cult as a statue of John “stood in the baptistery of the Lateran basilica, put there in Constantine’s time. The fourth-century building boom in Palestine included a settlement of monks at Aenon, where John the Baptist had exercised his ministry (cf. Jn 3:23), and baptisms were administered there” (Lienhard 197). Thus, authors who decide to portray John must rely on the gospel stories and their imaginations.

As with the gospel accounts, the five authors focus on different aspects of John’s life. Only Mailer’ and Burgess’s novels, following Luke’s description, mention John’s birth and background. According to Luke, John’s father is a priest named Zechariah who is serving at the temple when an angel appears to him, much in the same way the angel appears to Mary with an important message. The angel tells Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a child to be named John; this child “is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:15–16).

Zechariah, however, is not sure that this truly is an angel and questions him. The angel, in response, renders Zechariah unable to talk until the birth of the child. From his birth, then, people know that John is somehow different from other children, in direct contrast to the humble and quiet early years of Jesus.

The Gospel According to the Son’s John the Baptist, as in Luke, is Jesus’ cousin. In fact, it is while Mary is away visiting Elizabeth, John’s mother, that Joseph hears a voice telling him that he should marry Mary, and, as in the gospel narratives, John leaps in the womb when he hears Mary’s voice. John’s father, Zacharias, however, has a slightly different role in society. He is still a priest, as he is in the gospel stories, but in Mailer’s novel, he has been an Essene priest. Mailer’s novel uses this fact to explain why Zacharias and Elizabeth have not had a child: “they believed that the body must be kept as a temple. Only a pure body could offer pure prayers in the struggle against the powers of evil. Therefore, they remained childless” (25). Thus, in Mailer’s book, it is not barrenness that prevents Elizabeth from conceiving; it is piety.
However, Elizabeth regrets not having a child, and here Mailer uses the word “barren” to describe her condition. In light of what Mailer’s book has already told the reader about Zacharias and Elizabeth’s beliefs, though, “barren” must be interpreted as meaning, simply, not having children. For, she prays for a child, and her prayer is heard. When Gabriel tells Zacharias this news, he questions the angel, as in the gospels, and he is struck dumb for doubting God’s power. However, later that day, “he was able to rise and give issue to Elizabeth,” Mailer states (26). This event lessens the significance of the miracle from what it bears in the gospel accounts. By ascribing Elizabeth’s inability to have children to Zacharias and Elizabeth’s abstinence out of religious beliefs, Mailer’s book implies that they could have had children at any time had they simply wanted to. Why Zacharias is surprised by the news of his wife’s pregnancy, then, is inexplicable unless there is the possibility the angel is undermining religious teachings. That is out of the ordinary, but it is no miracle.

Mailer’s novel also uses John’s Essene background to explain his habits, unlike the gospel accounts, in which the angel tells Zechariah that John should take the Nazarite vows, which, according to Numbers 6:3–6, included not drinking any fermented drink, eating of anything that comes from the grape-vine, or cutting one’s hair. Instead, according to Mailer’s book, John’s leanness is credited to his parents, based on their Essene beliefs, which diminishes any connection between John the Baptist and the Nazarites of the Old Testament and removes the connection the gospel accounts find for John as a continuation of the Old Testament prophetic tradition.

In Burgess’ novel, also, John the Baptist’s beginnings are similar to what is told in the gospel stories. Zacharias is performing his priestly duty when an angel appears to him, telling him that he and Elizabeth will have a son. Zacharias does not believe him, and he is struck dumb. When he arrives home, he writes out for Elizabeth what has happened, and they await the birth of their son, whom they believe to be special, perhaps even the Messiah. Burgess, as he often does, merely retells the gospel account with a bit more exposition, not adding anything to the characters as they are presented.
According to the gospels, when John becomes an adult, he begins to preach a message of repentance and preparation: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance”; “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him”; and “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie” (Luke 3:8, 4, 16). John clearly recognizes his place as a harbinger of the Messiah, but not as the Messiah himself. In fact, according to Matthew (and only Matthew, interestingly), John does not even feel that he should baptize Jesus: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt. 3:14). Jesus refers to John as the one who was to come before the Messiah and sees John as the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (though the least in the kingdom is somehow greater than John): “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come” (Matt. 11:13–14).

Burgess’ novel focuses on this role for John as the precursor of the Messiah, as do Kazantzakis’ and Mailer’s. Saramago’s book mentions John’s baptizing Jesus, but it is an anticlimactic scene. In fact, all of these authors’ works tend to treat the baptism scene as if they are checking off another item on a list that they must cover in presenting the story of Jesus.

Burgess, throughout his work, makes prophecies seem obvious to his characters. Thus, whenever they need to fulfill a prophecy, they go about it with a sense of duty. When Jesus approaches John to be baptized, “each permitted himself a smile of greeting” (107) before they exchange the words they know they have to say. The action is perfunctory and quick, with no explication at all. After Jesus is baptized, John tells Philip and Andrew, two of his disciples, that they should go to Nazareth, as that is where the ministry is to begin. This portrayal is consistent with Burgess’ matter-of-fact methodology, as the outcomes always seem to be foreordained to those who

---

1Only Christopher Moore, in Lamb, has a John the Baptist who ever believes that he might be the Messiah. When they are teenagers and he has already begun baptizing people, he tells Joshua (Jesus), “You think you’re the one, don’t you? Well, you’re not. My birth was announced by an angel as well. It was prophesied that I would lead. You’re not the one” (87). It’s easy to hear the teenaged voice coming through Moore’s portrayal here, as it’s clear that John wants to be the one, in typical teenaged mode. However, after John hears that Joshua can raise the dead and after Joshua heals John of a rash he acquired from spending too much time in the water baptizing people, he believes that Joshua is the Messiah.
know the story, and the characters, especially his Jesus, certainly already know the story.

John the Baptist is the harbinger of the Messiah in Kazantzakis’ novel, but he is not introduced until halfway. He is mentioned earlier, as Andrew, Peter’s brother, has been a follower of John before he comes to join Jesus. However, Jesus has already begun his ministry before he goes to talk to John, and he only does so then because he and Judas want to know if Jesus really is the Messiah or not, and they agree to let John decide.

John’s message is just as it is in the gospels: “Repent! Repent! The day of the Lord has come! Roll on the ground, bite the dust, howl! The Lord of Hosts has said: ‘On this day I shall command the sun to set at noon; I shall crush the horns of the new moon and spill darkness over heaven and earth. I shall reverse your laughter, turn it into tears, and your songs into lamentation. I shall blow, and all your finery—hands, feet, noses, ears, hair—will fall to the ground’” (237). It is not until after Jesus’ baptism that Kazantzakis’ novel begins to develop John more fully.

In Mailer’s novel, people still mistake John for the Messiah. The High Priest sends Levites to John to ask him directly if he is the Messiah they have been expecting because he preaches with such force. John is even clearer in Mailer’s work than he is in the New Testament in response to this question: “I baptize with water, no more. I am not the Messiah” (28).

Saramago’s novel has a simple scene that makes the encounter with John nothing more than a step Jesus must pass before his crucifixion. John the Baptist is not mentioned here until about thirty pages before Jesus’ crucifixion and the end of the book. John questions Jesus as to what he has been able to do, and Jesus responds with the answer that, in the Biblical versions, he gives to John’s disciples who ask him if he is the one they are to expect: “the blind regain their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are made clean and the deaf hear, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (356). John then baptizes Jesus and exits without saying anything more. This is the only encounter between the two of them, as Saramago’s novel does not develop the family connections or give John any other role in Jesus’ life.
In the novels where Jesus and John have more interaction, it seems that their relationship is strained, nowhere more so than in Kazantzakis’ novel. There, Jesus and John disagree on the message that Jesus is supposed to bring. Until his encounter with John, Jesus’ message had been one of love and love only. John, however, believes that anger and fire should be the message of the Messiah: “How can you love the unjust, the infamous and the shameless? Strike! One of man’s greatest obligations is anger” (242). However, he does baptize Jesus despite having lingering doubts about Jesus as the Messiah. Before Jesus goes into the desert to wrestle with God and Satan, John gives Jesus some advice:

Change your expression, strengthen your arms, make firm your heart. Your life is a heavy one. I see blood and thorns on your brow. Endure, my brother and superior, courage! Two roads open up in front of you: the road of man, which is level, and the road of God, which ascends. Take the more difficult road. Farewell! And don’t feel afflicted at partings. Your duty is not to weep; it is to strike. Strike! and may you have a steady hand! That is your road. Both ways are the daughters of God, do not forget that. But Fire was born first and Love afterward. Let us begin therefore with Fire. (243)

It is not until his time in the desert and the death of John the Baptist, though, that Jesus does take up the ax that John has laid down. In fact, when the disciples see him after his time in the desert, it seems as if Jesus and John have somehow merged: “His forcefully clinched fist, his hair, cheeks and eyes were identical with those of the Baptist. The open-mouthed disciples looked at him silently. Could the two men have joined and become one? . . . The companions shuddered, for this was not his own voice; it was the voice of the fearful prophet, the Baptist” (294). For Kazantzakis’ novel, Jesus needs John in order to be complete and to supply to his ministry the Fire needed for the mission on earth, even as he preaches the Love he feels that God is calling him to preach. The depiction of Jesus in the gospels is often taken to be nothing more than a messenger
of love; however, many of Jesus’ parables end with comments strikingly similar to John’s, with people being cast out into darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Kazantzakis’ novel expands this idea to show John as the means behind that portion of the message, thus making more balanced a Jesus who combines mercy and justice, as opposed to conveying only the extreme message of John.

Burgess’ novel also shows Jesus and John disagreeing about Jesus’ message. It crafts a childhood event involving both John and Jesus to illustrate the main difference between their teachings. They are in Jerusalem for the Passover, and they are walking off by themselves, discussing ideas, such as whether to believe in fathers and what is the origin of mankind when a prostitute overhears them and joins in the discussion. Jesus is polite to her, though he turns down her offer; John tells him that he should “by rights have rebuked her. It is a sinful profession” (77). Jesus reminds John that he could have rebuked her, which John claims to have been doing with his stern expression. Jesus admits that her actions are sinful, but: “I liked the girl. She was not respectable. It is respectability that I hate, and yet respectability is not put among the sins.” He tells John that if they have any true calling in the future, “it is among the sinners [they] must go,” but John cannot accept with this. He believes that “to like sinners is to like sin.” Jesus responds with what, in Burgess’ novel, will become the cornerstone of his message: “Ah no, not at all. It is as much as to say that to cherish the sick is to cherish their sickness. Let me not say like either. Love is the needful word” (78).

In their ministries, John focuses on the repentance of sin, as he criticizes almost everyone he encounters, from the Pharisees to Herod. Jesus, however, presents a message of love to those who are unloved by the rest of the society, especially the religious leaders. He balances this message of love, though, with one of justice, especially in his criticism of the religious leaders, as he thinks they are more concerned with being respectable than with doing what is right.

This tension between John and Jesus is only implicit in the gospels. Some people try to compare Jesus and John, often through the actions of
They Love to Tell the Story

their disciples. Some Pharisees and teachers of the law say to Jesus, “John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking” (Luke 5:33). Even in the book of Acts, there are those who have been baptized by John but have not heard about Jesus. In fact, there are still some who trace their religious heritage to John but do not claim him as Messiah. A small group of followers in Mesopotamia, called the Mandeans, attempt to continue John’s movement. And one of John’s disciples, briefly mentioned in the Clementine Recognitions, claims that John is actually the Messiah, not Jesus (Farmer 962).

Mailer’s story goes beyond disagreement between Jesus and John to present a John who sees himself as a teacher and a Jesus as someone who needs to learn from this teacher. When Jesus seeks John, it is not for approval of his upcoming ministry; instead, he says that he is “one more pilgrim” (28). John, though, has been waiting for Jesus, expecting his arrival at any time. However, John treats him as just another pilgrim up until the baptism. John clearly implies that Jesus has sinned and needs to repent. Upon Jesus’ protestations that he has few, small sins, John responds, “Well, you can still repent. Our sin is always more than we know” (31). John willingly baptizes Jesus, in direct contrast to the gospel account in which he believes he is unfit to baptize Jesus. In fact, in Mailer’s version John seems eager to get his duty done, so that he can finish his life: “I have been told to wait for you, and I am tired. It is good that you are here” (29).

However, when Jesus comes out of the water, John either senses that Jesus is now different, or, perhaps, John at least hopes that is the case. He seems to want Jesus to be the Messiah, but he doesn’t know if he is or not. Thus, John asks him, “Did the light of the Lord appear when you were immersed?” Jesus responds with a question of his own: “Is it not death and destruction to see Him?” (36). John knows at that moment that Jesus is the Messiah and simply responds, “For all but the Christ” (37). At that point, he simply tells Jesus that he has always known this day would come, and he leaves Jesus there. This portrayal of John is a combination of what is presented in the gospels, as Mailer’s John has been waiting for Jesus, with a more modern skepticism, since John is not certain that Jesus is the Messiah even after he has baptized.
him. Rather than relying on a mystical feeling, he needs at least a minimum of empirical evidence to decide that Jesus is the Messiah.

Ricci’s story takes the idea of John as Jesus’ teacher even further. John is a teacher in the desert, and Jesus is one of his disciples. John “went among the Jews preaching justice for the common people and condemning every sort of hypocrisy” (282). He is put to death by Herod for criticizing Herod’s relationship with his brother’s wife, and, thus, he sends his followers away from him. A man in a crowd accuses Jesus of deserting John at this time: “There are more who believe in him now because they saw he was ready to die when Herod took him. But some of those who were with him just ran off” (362).

Jesus, however, tells his disciples the true story of what happened. John tried to send all of his disciples away, but they refuse to leave. John says that six of them can stay, but six of them must leave; that way people will not say they were cowards, and there will also be some left to spread John’s teaching. Jesus draws a short straw, so he must leave, which he does not want to do. Those who stay are butchered by the Romans, and, in fact, some of the six who are supposed to leave return and are also killed with John. Thus, Jesus says, “... it seemed cowardly that I’d gone. I didn’t know if I could go on then. Here was my teacher in prison, and my friends dead, and I hadn’t done anything” (368). This portrayal of John certainly raises his stature higher than what he merits in the other novels and in the gospels. John is much more in control of the situation, though neither he nor Jesus knows what the future holds. As such, this scene thereby lowers the stature of Jesus to someone who is much more human while elevating John to the level of spiritual teacher, though not beyond any humanly possible level of spiritual enlightenment.

In the gospels, as in Ricci’s novel, John is ultimately killed by Herod because of a request by Herodias, his brother’s wife. John criticizes Herod for his relationship with Herodias, but Herod is unwilling to put him to death for his criticism. However, Herodias, who is furious with John’s comments,

---

4In Lamb, Christopher Moore shows John teaching Jesus for over a year, and, in fact, it is John who identifies the Divine Spark that Jesus has learned about as the Holy Ghost.
They Love to Tell the Story

has her daughter dance for Herod. Herod is so enchanted with the dance that he offers the daughter anything, up to half his kingdom. She asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter, and Herod must comply with this request (Matt. 14:1–12).

Like Ricci, almost all of these authors, with the exception of Kazantzakis, tell the story of John's death. In Burgess' novel, John becomes well-known for criticizing Herod for marrying his brother's wife. Herod and John, though, are actually distant cousins. Thus, when John presses through the crowd to confront Herod with his sin, he is allowed to get near enough to Herod to speak clearly: “The man you call your king is a sinner and a foul sinner. The woman he calls his wife is an adulteress and an incestuous fornicator. The sin is upon you all who abet the sin” (102). His constant rebuke of Herod eventually gets him thrown into prison, though at Herodias’ insistence. Because of Herod’s familial relationship with John, he is reluctant to do anything to John, including kill him. Thus, Herodias must trick Herod into committing himself to Salome so that she can ask for John's head. This is slightly different from the gospel stories in which Herod's reluctance to kill John comes from the people's perception of John and because Herod likes to listen to him. By making John and Herod relatives, Burgess' novel takes away an important dimension of Herod and of John, as Herod is no longer afraid of what the people think of John, and John ceases to have the power to sway the people including even Herod.

Mailer's book also follows the gospel accounts and shows John being thrown into prison for criticizing Herod and shows that he is later beheaded at the request of Salome, who dances so well for Herod that he promised her anything she asks, even up to half his kingdom. John's death leads to Jesus' anxieties about being killed, especially when his disciples tell him that the people are beginning to believe that Jesus is John resurrected. Thus, Jesus sends his disciples out, while he stays in a cave to deal with his fears: “I did not often sleep. Alone in my cave, I looked for solace in the thought that God was near while Herod Antipas was in his palace and far away” (113). Therefore, Jesus has to deal with the fear of his death even earlier than the night in the Garden of Gethsemane; Mailer evidently decides, then, to have
John’s death serve as the catalyst of Jesus’ fear. In the gospels, Jesus’ reaction to John’s imprisonment and death is to use John as an example of one who preaches the truth; this change shows a Jesus who struggles with human temptations throughout his ministry, not just at his death, thus providing readers with a Jesus who is more easily identified with.

What is also interesting is that the authors who do mention John’s death at the hands of Herod rely on the gospel accounts, and not the historical record. John is put to death by Herod, as Josephus relates in *Antiquities*, but not for the reason given in the gospels. Instead, as Farmer writes, “John was arrested because Herod feared the political consequences of his popularity” (959). This does not mean that Herod did not have any ill will toward John for the criticism of Herod’s lifestyle, but it should be noted that Herod probably would have seen those comments as treasonous more so than religious. Given these authors’ propensities to salvage interesting character traits from history, it is surprising that none of them, especially Ricci, who draws heavily on historical criticism, develop this aspect of John’s character.

Saramago’s novel briefly mentions John’s beheading by Herod just a few pages after John has criticized Herod’s relationship with Herodias; however, Saramago merely summarizes the event. John does preach in the wilderness, but after Jesus has already begun his ministry; in fact, Jesus has performed most of his miracles and gathered all of his disciples before John is even introduced. John becomes an even more minor character in Saramago’s presentation than in the gospels.

Other than Saramago, these authors’ works show a John in tension with Jesus, trying to guide his teachings, much more so than is presented in the gospels. In fact, John’s death by Herod is less important for what happens to John than to show how Jesus reacts. Thus, though John is not always shown to be a forerunner of Jesus, John’s character is used to shift the focus to Jesus.