

# Leeds Studies in English

## Article:

John Marshall, 'The Chester Coopers' Pageant "selles" and "cathedra"', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 8, (1975), 120-28

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## THE CHESTER COOPERS' PAGEANT: 'SELLES' AND 'CATHEDRA'

By JOHN MARSHALL

The expenditure, "Item too selles to the caryge the pryse iis viiid" recorded in the 1572 Whitsun play accounts of the Chester Coopers' Company,<sup>1</sup> presents an interesting insight into the stage-setting of a mystery cycle pageant. Previous studies of the Chester plays seem to overlook the relevance of "selles" to the Coopers' play of the *Trial and Flagellation*. F.M. Salter, in *Mediaeval Drama in Chester*, for example, does not discuss the meaning of "selles" when speculating on the appearance of the *Trial and Flagellation* pageant; nor does he gloss the word when, in the same chapter, he prints in full the 1572 Coopers' accounts, even though he offers explanations of a few words more common than "selles".<sup>2</sup>

A possible consequence of this omission may be found in the booklet on the plays prepared for the Chester Corporation. The editor of this compilation of city archive material prints a modern translation of the same accounts and interprets three of the less familiar words. The first of these is "selles", for which two possible meanings are given: (a) "a case or cases for standards or banners" (Latin *cella*) and (b) "panelling, ceiling or canopy" (Latin *celum, selum, selo*) which the editor connects with *celer*, "the ceiler or canopy of a bed".<sup>3</sup> The canopy or roof of the pageant appears at first sight to be a satisfactory explanation, but the expenditure is incurred for two "selles" when a single pageant roof is all that would be required. The Chester booklet, in modernizing the original, alters "Item too selles to the caryge" to "Item to selles to the carriage", thereby obscuring the actual number of items purchased.<sup>5</sup> Not only is "selles" unlikely to mean "roofs" or "canopies" in this context, but in the same Coopers' accounts occurs the word "howsynge", which could very well be a term for the roofing:

Item spende at the brengeng vp of yt [the carriage] to  
y<sup>e</sup> menster gatte for cordes & penes to sette vp the  
howsynge of the caryghe ijs.<sup>6</sup>

This housing was apparently replaced for the subsequent performance of the plays, as recorded in the Coopers' accounts printed by Salter for 20 Nov 1574: "Item for newe housinge to oure cariadge vjd".

A late Middle English meaning of "sell" (adopted from the French *selle* and derived from the Latin *sella*) is given by the *OED* as "a seat, a low stool; a seat of dignity". Interestingly the *OED*

provides an illustrative quotation for "sell" from the early fifteenth century morality play *The Castle of Perseverance*: (Detraccio speaking to Belyal) "Heyl, set in þyn selle".<sup>8</sup> The glossary to Eccles' edition of the play agrees with the *OED* definition of "sell", although Richard Southern, in *The Medieval Theatre in the Round*, interprets the word as "cell" and considers it to be a general reference to Belyal's scaffold.<sup>9</sup> More probably "selle" refers to the seat on the scaffold which Belyal indicates earlier in the play when he declares, "On benche wyl I byde" (232). In the York *Harrowing of Hell*<sup>10</sup> "selle" is used in a similar context:

Jesus. And deuyll, I comaunde þe go doune,  
In-to thy selle where þou schalte sitte.  
(341-342)

The parallel passage from the Towneley cycle<sup>11</sup> is unambiguous in its use of "sete" instead of "selle":

Ihesus. Devi~~ll~~, I commaunde the to go downe  
into thi sete where thou shaft~~st~~ syt.  
(357-358)

The incorporation of two "seats" into the stage-setting of the Chester pageant offers a more probable explanation of the Coopers' expenditure than do the alternative glosses on "selles". The meaning "seats" can be supported by considering an associated problem concerning the translation of two Latin stage directions in the *Trial and Flagellation*. The first occurs near the beginning of the play after the Jews have brought Christ before Caiaphas and Annas:

Tunc Judei statuent Jesum in cathedram, et dicat  
torquendo Primus Judeus. (after 73)<sup>12</sup>

Salter translates the opening as "Then the Jews place Jesus in the cathedra", assuming that "cathedra" means "church".<sup>13</sup> His reasons for rejecting the seemingly more appropriate translation, "chair", are based upon the distinctions made by Du Cange between classical and medieval Latin. Evidence, presumably unnoticed by Salter, that the meaning "chair" was contemporary with the Chester cycle is found in a stage direction in the *Harrowing of Hell*:

Tunc Sathan sedens in cathedra dicat daemonibus.  
(after 96)<sup>14</sup>

Salter attempts to corroborate what he considers to be the medieval translation "church" by drawing attention to the twopence paid by the Coopers, in 1575 (the accounts dated 20 Nov 1574), to Richard Doby, a glazier, and by suggesting from this tenuous association that "the cathedra of the Flagellation play is represented by a window, perhaps even a stained-glass one, at the mid-rear of the stage".<sup>15</sup> The

appearance of Richard Doby in the Coopers' accounts can be explained perhaps more simply. The Glaziers, the Embroiderers and the Stationers were amalgamated with the Painters' Company who hired the Coopers' carriage to perform their *Shepherds* play.<sup>16</sup> Given this relationship between the guilds, and the apparent diversity of Doby's talents - the Painters' accounts<sup>17</sup> record, a fine for his absence from a meeting (1569), a payment "for bayre that Rochart doby hade id" (1572),<sup>18</sup> and payments to him for stilt-walking (1573 and 1575) - the twopence he received from the Coopers is more likely an indication of some incidental sale or service unrelated to his skill as a glazier.

The placing of Christ in a church for the buffeting cannot be supported by the biblical source for this scene (Mark xiv. 53 ff). Moreover there are good theatrical reasons for translating the stage direction "cathedra" as "chair". The physical and verbal buffeting carried out by the four Jews, which follows the stage direction, loses much of its pathetic quality if Christ remains standing: indeed the scene would become almost comic if the tormentors were shorter than Christ. The Wakefield Master, in the Towneley *Coliphizacio*,<sup>19</sup> was clearly familiar with the difficulty. Through the speech of *Secundus Tortor* he sends *Froward*, the servant, to "Go fetche vs a light buffit" (351). *Froward*, doubting the justice of offering Christ this comfort, is given a reply which humorously confirms the playwright's awareness of the problem:

*Froward*. Why must he sytt soft - with a mekill myschaunce! -  
That has tenyd vs thus oft?

*I Tortor*. Sir, we do it for a skawnce.  
If he stode vpon loft, we must hop and dawnse  
As cokys in a croft.

(352-355)

The most convincing evidence that the Coopers also found it necessary to seat Christ for the buffeting is contained in the Chester Banns bound in MS Harl. 2150.<sup>20</sup> Although the folio which includes the Coopers' pageant is transcribed in the seventeenth-century hand of Randle Holme, Greg when discussing these Banns sees no reason to doubt that it is merely a copy of an earlier original.<sup>21</sup> The pageant stanza for the *Trial and Flagellation* reads:

flechers bowyers w<sup>th</sup> great honors  
the Cowps find the Tormentors  
that bobbyde god w<sup>th</sup> gret horrors  
as he sat in his chere.

The word "chere" in this stanza is one possible translation of the stage direction "cathedra", but it would be misleading to assume from this that Christ is placed on the type of four-legged seat with a backrest now commonly described as a chair. The earlier and less specific definition of "chair" given by the *OED* is a "seat for one person".<sup>22</sup> A further difficulty in determining the type of seat

referred to in the Banns and stage direction arises because the English meaning of "cathedra" given in fifteenth-century and sixteenth-century dictionaries was not always restricted to "chair". Two English-Latin wordbooks of the fifteenth century give "cathedra" for "chayere", whereas Huloet (1552) gives "cathedra" separately for "benche", "chayre" and "stoole", and Elyot (1538) under "cathedra" lists only "a benche or stoole".<sup>23</sup>

The buffeting of Christ could be staged effectively using a chair, stool or bench, but comparison with the corresponding plays from the other cycles suggests that in the Coopers' *Trial and Flagellation* stage direction the meaning "stool" for "cathedra" was intended. Of the four surviving English mystery cycles only Chester omits a specific reference to a stool in the buffeting scene. The Towneley play calls for the fetching of a "stoyll" or "buffit" and at York, "Late see, who stertis for a stole?" (359) seems to indicate a similar arrangement. The N-Town cycle scene, from *Passion Play II*, is described in the stage direction:

here þei xal bete jhesus A-bout þe hed and þe body and  
spyttyn in his face and pullyn hym down and settyn hym  
on A stol and castyn A cloth ouyr his face.

(after 160)<sup>24</sup>

The theatrical convention of seating Christ on a stool during the buffeting seems to have been well established.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the York and Towneley plays, the Chester text of the *Trial and Flagellation* has no suggestion that the "cathedra" was brought into the action from elsewhere, possibly even from off stage. This may mean that the "cathedra" was on stage from the beginning of the play or simply that the less dramatically developed dialogue of the Chester play did not include these theatrical details.

In view of this evidence supporting the use of a stool it is possible to speculate that one of the "selles" purchased by the Coopers provided the "cathedra" for the buffeting scene. The "low stool" part of the *OED* definition of "sell" corresponds exactly with the *OED* meaning of "buffet" as the word is used in the Towneley play.<sup>26</sup> In the fifteenth century the "buffet" appears to have been a three-legged stool<sup>27</sup> but by the sixteenth century became the more general term for most kinds of low stool, some of which were quite elaborate.<sup>28</sup> Although rather late for these purposes, Cotgrave (1611) reveals an interesting relationship between "selle" and "buffet". He defines "selle" as a "stoole or seat" and enlarges on "selle" as "any ill favored, ordinarie or countrey stoole, of a cheaper sort than the ioyned, or buffet-stoole".<sup>29</sup> It seems, then, that by the early seventeenth century "selle" may have possessed a meaning similar to that of the earlier less sophisticated "buffet". Certainly the "selle" described by Cotgrave would have been appropriate to the staging of Christ's buffeting.

The second stage direction in the Chester *Trial and Flagellation* to include "cathedra" follows the scourging and precedes the mocking

of Christ:

Tunc postquam flagellaverent eum, postea induunt eum  
purpurea ponentes in cathedram, et dicat Primus Judeus.  
(after 334)

Salter makes no direct reference to this stage direction but, in view of his previous interpretation of "cathedra", presumably would agree with the translation given in the Chester booklet:

Then as soon as they shall have scourged him afterwards  
they put on him the purple cloth hanging in the church  
and the first Jew says.<sup>30</sup>

However, the use of a seat ("cathedra") in this scene is made clear in the variant reading of the stage direction in MS Harl. 2124:<sup>31</sup>

tunc flagellabunt eum et postea induent cum purpura  
sedentem in Cathedra.  
(after 328)

This may be a reference to the "cathedra" used previously for the buffeting or to a second seat, possibly another stool. The N-Town cycle refers to a stool in the stage direction which precedes the mocking of Christ:

and qwan he is skorgyd . þei put upon hym A cloth of  
sylk and settyn hym on a stol . . . .  
(after 677)

In the York *Second Trial Before Pilate* there is a suggestion in the line "Do sette hym in þis sete, as a semely in sales" (398) that, for the mocking, Christ is placed on a rather more dignified seat than a stool, possibly for reasons of dramatic irony. It is of some interest that although the New Testament does not specify that Christ is seated at this point, the apocryphal Gospel of Peter describes a situation similar to that in the York play: "And they put on him a purple robe, and made him sit upon the seat of judgement".<sup>32</sup> It is impossible to tell from the Coopers' text of the *Trial and Flagellation* what type of seat was used in the Chester mocking scene, although it does seem probable that it was the second of the two "selles". Thus it may have been either a stool similar in design to that used for the buffeting or a "selle" more aptly described as a "seat of dignity", possibly a panelled chair with boxed-in seat. In this connexion it is perhaps worth noting that the Chester *Trial and Flagellation* can be staged with the minimum of a "seat of dignity", defining in turn the locus of the High Priests, Pilate and Herod, at one end of the pageant wagon and a stool for the buffeting at the other. In such a setting the mocking would take place at the "seat of dignity", and preparation for

this is possibly made eighty lines before the event with the stage direction:

Tunc Pilatus lavabit manibus, et Cayphas et Annas  
recedent cum Pilato.

(after 254)

The actual stage-setting of the Coopers' pageant may only be guessed at but it seems reasonable to suppose that the need for two "cathedras" was met, for the 1572 performance, by the purchase of "too selles".

NOTES

I would like to thank Lawrence M. Clopper of Indiana University for allowing me to use his, as yet, unpublished transcripts of the Chester guild records - mention is made in the notes below where his reading differs from published sources - and both Peter Meredith and Professor A.C. Cawley of the University of Leeds for help in the preparation of this article and for suggestions for its revision.

- 1 The Coopers' accounts for the Whitsun plays and Midsummer Show, including those for 1572, are published in *The Trial and Flagellation with Other Studies in the Chester Cycle*, ed. W.W. Greg (Oxford, Malone Society, 1935), pp. 14-24 (hereafter referred to as *Trial*).
- 2 F.M. Salter, *Mediaeval Drama in Chester* (Toronto, 1955), pp. 65-67 for the discussion of the Coopers' pageant, and pp. 72-73 for the 1572 accounts. He also prints the Coopers' accounts dated 20 Nov 1574 and the Smiths' accounts for 1554, pp. 74-77 (hereafter referred to as *MDC*).
- 3 *Chester Mystery Plays* (Chester, 1962), p. 17.
- 4 Apart from the internal evidence of the pageant accounts, roofs to the pageant wagons at Chester may be inferred from part of Rogers' *Breviary* (Chester Archives copy and BM MS Harl. 1944), "these pagiantes or carige was a highe place made like a howse . . .", taken from Lawrence M. Clopper, "The Rogers' Description of the Chester Plays", *Leeds Studies in English*, 7 (1974), 63-94, esp. 85.
- 5 If the scribe had intended the meaning "Item to selles" rather than "Item two selles", the expenditure would more probably have been expressed as "Item for selles". See, for example, "Item for ieren . . ." and "more for frettes & for axeltre pennes" from the same accounts (*MDC*, p. 73) and "Item for a borde to the cariage" from the 20 Nov 1574 accounts (*MDC*, p. 75).
- 6 Salter misreads the long "s" in "howsynge" and prints "howlynge" in both *Trial*, p. 16, and *MDC*, p. 73.
- 7 *OED*, s.v. Sell, sb<sup>1</sup> l.
- 8 *The Macro Plays*, ed. Mark Eccles, EETS, OS, 262 (1969), line 1746; in *OED* line 1749 from the earlier edition of F.J. Furnivall and A.W. Pollard, EETS, ES, 91 (1904).
- 9 Richard Southern, *The Medieval Theatre in the Round*, 2nd ed. (London, 1975), p. lll.
- 10 *York Plays*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (Oxford, 1885).
- 11 *The Towneley Plays*, ed. George England and Alfred W. Pollard, EETS, ES, 71 (1897).
- 12 The line numbers for the *Trial and Flagellation*, and all quotations unless otherwise stated, are from the Coopers' own manuscript of the play (MS C), published in *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, EETS, SS, 3 (1974), pp. 517-532.
- 13 *MDC*, p. 66.



- 14 MS Huntington 2, ed. Lumiansky and Mills.  
Of associated interest is a continental use of "cathedra" as "chair" in a theatrical context. The fourteenth-century *Ordo* for the Paduan *Annunciation* makes provision for the boy playing Gabriel to be carried on the "cathedra" from the Baptistry to the Cathedral:
- Hijs dimissis, processionaliter pergant ad baptisterium, et ibi stet puer preparatus in modum Gabrielis super cathedram; et de baptisterio eleuetur et feratur in ecclesiam a latere platee, et protetur super scalam uersus chorum.
- (Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1933), II, p. 248.
- 15 MDC, p. 66. Salter presumably considers that Doby was repairing the glass because in note 22, p. 113, he gives an example of the 1585 rate for new glass as 7d per foot. At that rate the Coopers could have expected a new window measuring only about 4 inches.
- 16 See the list of plays and guilds in BM MS Harl. 2150, printed in *Trial*, pp. 130-132. The Painters hired the Coopers' carriage for the first day of the three-day cycle performance, the Coopers used it on the second day, and the Skinners hired the carriage for the third day to perform the *Resurrection*. The Coopers' 1572 accounts begin with a financial record of this arrangement: "reseuyd of the paynters and of the skyners for the caryge xs iiiid".
- 17 Joseph C. Bridge, "Items of Expenditure from the 16th Century Accounts of the Painters, Glaziers, Embroiderers and Stationers Company, with special reference to the "Shepherds" Play", *Journal of the Architectural, Archaeological and Historic Society for the County and the City of Chester and North Wales*, NS, 20 (1914), 153-191, esp. 170).
- 18 This is Lawrence Clopper's reading; Bridge (p. 170) gives, "For bayse [baize] that Richard Dobie had jd". If the Painters had been buying "baize", or any other article, from Doby the expenditure would more probably have been expressed as "Item to Richard Doby for baize", following the pattern found throughout the Painters' accounts. See, for example, "Item payde to Rogare Colarke for ij yarne stabylles iijd" and "Item to petar a moston for troues shone makyng & for hys penes an labore xvid" (both from Clopper's transcript but the same impression can be gained from Bridge, pp. 166-170). In spite of the rather obscure spelling it seems possible that the Painters were paying for "beer" which Doby consumed or "hade". Certainly the price was appropriate as the 1572 accounts also record "Item a pott of beare jd".
- 19 A.C. Cawley, *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* (Manchester, 1958), pp. 78-90.
- 20 *Trial*, pp. 133-139.
- 21 *Trial*, pp. 126-127.
- 22 OED, s.v. Chair, sb<sup>1</sup> 1.
- 23 *Promptorium parvulorum sive clericorum, lexicon Anglo-Latinum princeps c.* 1440 (Camden Society, 1843-1865).  
*Catholicon Anglicum; an English-Latin Wordbook dated 1483*, ed. S.J.H. Herrtage and H.B. Wheatley, EETS, OS, 75 (1881).  
Richard Huloet, *Abcedarium Anglico Latinum* (London, 1552; reprinted in facsimile, Menston, Scolar Press, 1970).  
Thomas Elyot, *Dictionary* (London, 1538; reprinted in facsimile, Menston, Scolar Press, 1970).

- 24 *Ludus Coventriae or The Play Called Corpus Christi*, ed. K.S. Block, EETS, ES, 120 (1922) (now more generally, and properly, referred to as the N-Town cycle).
- 25 The pictorial convention was also well established. See, for example, Christ seated on a stool for the buffeting in BM MS Arundel 83, f. 125.
- 26 OED, s.v. Buffet, sb<sup>2</sup> 1.
- 27 The *Promptorium parvulorum* gives under "Bofet, thre fotyde stole", the Latin "Tripes"; and under "Buffett stole", the Latin "Scabellum, tripes, trisilis".
- 28 In the inventory of Thomas, Lord Wharton of Healaugh for 1568, printed in *Yorkshire Probate Inventories 1542-1689*, ed. Peter C.D. Brears, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series, 134 (1972), pp. 20-36, are two items which show the range of stools covered by the term "buffet":
- |   |        |
|---|--------|
| Item fyve buffet Stolles whereof 4 covered with |        |
| Damask one with croylle nedle worke             | 16 8   |
| Item 51 buffet stoles                           | 1 6 8. |
- 29 Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London, 1611; reprinted in facsimile, Menston, Scolar Press, 1968).
- 30 *Chester Mystery Plays*, p. 24.
- 31 *The Chester Plays*, ed. H. Deimling and Dr Matthews, EETS, ES, 62 (1892), 115 (1916), p. 293.
- 32 M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, corrected ed. (Oxford, 1953), p. 91.