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THE WEIGHT OF SIN IN THE YORK *CRUCIFIXIO*

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In the early 1960s, Eleanor Prosser reminded scholars that English mystery plays have above all else a religious purpose. To value the mysteries solely for their verse, their comedy, their realism, their special effects - this was to ignore that religious purpose. By analogy, it could be added, one might appreciate the Christ of the Gospels for his eloquence, his satire, his earthiness, and his own "special effects", and this would miss his religious significance too. Prosser in fact made the charge that critics had esteemed mystery drama only to the degree to which the plays are apparently not religious.¹

Many scholars have since sought to reverse this irony of criticism. Notable among them is V.A. Kolve, who has argued a dramatic unity of the Corpus Christi cycles based upon typological relationships between plays. Pertinent to the present essay is Kolve's treatment of comic realism in the passion sequences of cycle drama. Here, the crude and boisterous behaviour of the executioners must be accounted for. Kolve asserts that the antics of the soldiers give dramatic point to Christ's prayer on the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do". Seen in this light, these instances of comedy and realism do not detract from the theme of the passion, but enhance it. Kolve elaborates his argument by showing that the executioners consistently make Christ into a game figure.² Christ is of course blindfolded and beaten and asked to "prophesy". Soldiers in a Cornish play make a game of forging nails at a blacksmith's shop. The Chester soldiers neglect the task of mounting Christ on the cross to dice for his robe. Ordered back on the job, they busy themselves, like the York executioners, in devising ways to stretch Christ's limbs to fit the bored holes. The Wakefield soldiers jest that they are arming and horsing a great lord to ride into battle. Ironically, of course, this is true - Christ is the warrior who will soon harrow hell. But Christ is no more than a game figure to the soldiers - "they know not what they do".

The idea of "game", however, does not fully explain one episode of the York *Crucifixio*. In the second half of this pageant, after Christ is fastened to the cross the four soldiers struggle desperately to carry him to "jone hille".³ The action becomes a test of strength, a collective contest against the cross, a "game" of sorts - much as carrying a sofa up three flights of stairs can be a wonderful test of group initiative. As Kolve observes, this is a challenge for the soldiers "that exercises their highest

ingenuity, and whose accomplishment is a cause for rowdy self-congratulation" (p.190). In focusing upon the task at hand, they ignore their victim, and thus "know not what they do". Thus Kolve finds theological relevance in the action. But more is to be found by asking what any member of the audience might also have asked: Why is the cross so heavy?

First consider the episode in more detail. Lucy Toulmin Smith's marginal analysis of the York text provides this comment about the soldiers near the beginning of the episode: "They are ready, but make a great to-do about the weight" (p.355). Indeed they do. In the space of sixty-five lines, amidst a multitude of groans and curses and insults, the soldiers need three tries to carry Christ and the cross to the mortice. The first soldier exclaims that his "schuldir is in soundre" (1.190). The second cries out that his burden distresses him "wondir soore" (1.207). The third is sure his back will break, and "wantis wynde" (11.194, 204). The fourth speaks for all that "so wille [bewildered] of werke neuere we wore" (1.205). When the task is completed they do not cease comment: "He made us stande as any stones, / So boustous was he for to bere" (11.217-18).

In a pageant concerned to present the suffering of Christ, suddenly the focus is upon the suffering of the torturers themselves. This in itself demands notice. Further, to my knowledge the cross-carrying episode has no precedent in scripture or tradition. This too suggests an intended thematic weight. The episode and its emphasis are also unique in Corpus Christi drama. Chester and N Town suggest no such action. Wakefield has a parallel episode, also sixty-five lines in length, in which the soldiers pull the cross into place with a rope. But for the Wakefield soldiers it is a merry game - no one complains that the cross is heavy or that the work is hard. The York episode is unique, an invented action.

There is, of course, great realism to this action. According to medieval tradition the cross was a full fifteen feet high, and the added weight of a man would indeed make it a heavy cross to bear.⁴ There is comedy, too, in the frustration of the strong soldiers' efforts and in their inability to work together. But is this realism for the sake of realism, and comedy for the sake of comedy? We need not assume so if there is a reasonable way that this episode can fulfill the religious purpose of the drama, and Kolve has already demonstrated one way.

A further significance, in case we do not perceive it in the action alone, is made explicit by a complaint of the third soldier: "He weyes a wikkid weght" (1.213). To the soldier, his comment is no more than a mild oath. But recall the Wakefield soldiers who jest that Christ is a great warrior. Though "they know not what they do", they speak the truth. And so here. Christ "weyes a wikkid weght" because he bears the weight of the world's wickedness on the cross. He bears man's sin by proxy because men cannot bear it themselves. The struggle of the soldiers to lift the cross dramatizes the inability of even the best of men to bear such a distressing burden, for if we believe the soldiers, there are "full

fewer" men stronger than they (ll.201-2). The same third soldier who remarks upon the "wikkid weght" says earlier that Christ should think on his "wikkid werkis" (ll.65-6). Ironically, of course, it is the soldier's own "wikkid werkis" which Christ now bears in mind, and which help to comprise the "wikkid weght" upon the soldier's back. In short, this cross-carrying episode is nothing less than a dramatic metaphor of the atonement. The comedy and realism surrounding the cross are made to image what Christ is accomplishing on the cross.

To support this reading, the currency of two related concepts must be demonstrated. First is the association of sin with weight, the metaphor of sin as a burden to the sinner. Second is the figurative explanation of the atonement as Christ bearing or carrying man's sin for him. Both concepts are in fact fairly commonplace in scripture and in medieval religious literature. Even in our own time they still have a familiar ring.

The figure of sin as a burden to be borne is a standard feature of the Mosaic Law. In Leviticus alone, twelve different prohibitions take a form similar to the following: "Whoever curses his God shall bear [*portabit*] his sin".⁵ In the New Testament, Paul speaks of certain persons who are "burdened [*oneratas*] with sins and swayed by various impulses" (II Tim. iii 6). The writer of Hebrews encourages the faithful to "lay aside every weight [*pondus*], and sin which clings so closely" (Heb. xii 1).

Sin is a burden in at least two ways. "Lay not sin upon us", Aaron entreats Moses, "because we have done foolishly and have sinned [*ne imponas nobis hoc peccatum quod stulte commisimus*]" (Num. xii 11). Put in this way, Aaron asks the impossible. In the redundancy of his request, we see that sin is a burden not only of guilt but also of punishment. Thus the forty years of wandering in the wilderness is a stipulated penalty meted out as the way that "you shall bear your iniquity" (Num. xiv 34). And the psalmist petitions God to make his enemies "bear their guilt" (Ps. v 10).⁶ More than simply wanting his enemies to be known as guilty, he wishes them to incur punishment. Note also in these last examples that sin may be borne corporately as well as individually. Isaiah surveys his entire race and mourns, "Ah, sinful nation, a people laden [*gravi*] with iniquity" (Isa. i 4). And in the ruins of Jerusalem, the sin of past generations becomes the burden of the present generation: "Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear [*portavimus*] their iniquities" (Lam. v 7).

This very passage is paraphrased in the brief *Lay Folks' Catechism*, written for the common people of York by Archbishop John de Thoresby in 1357: "For our forme-fadirs synned, sais the prophet,/ And we bere the wickednesse of thair misdede".⁷ According to his modern editors, Archbishop de Thoresby "was evidently anxious that his catechism should be as widely disseminated among the lay folk as possible". It was issued in English "of the simplest character, so as to be understood by the most uncultured of the laity". Furthermore, it was cast "into the form of verse . . . - the more easily to be committed to memory" (pp.xv, xvii). If de Thoresby's catechism gained its intended use, the average Yorkshireman in the

audience on Corpus Christi day would know exactly what to make of "a wikkid weght".

The figure would also be familiar from liturgical hymns ascribed to St Gregory. From one sung at Sunday vespers comes the petition to "heed our sorrow that our soul does not become weighed down [gravata] with sin". And from a hymn for Wednesday vespers: "Remove completely the heavy burden [moles] of our sins".⁸ The metaphor persisted in sermons as well. A twelfth-century homily on the Lord's Prayer warns of "evil crimes" which "weigh down mankind" to hell.⁹ This idea of sin literally pressing man downwards to hell seems to be a peculiarly medieval elaboration designed to horrify the imagination. A sermon from the fourteenth or fifteenth century repeats the dismal prospect, referring to "we þat be charched with synne and with þe burdeyns of oure flesche and with many wicked dedes þat drawes man to derkenes of peyn in hell for euermore".¹⁰ And in medieval drama, a ready instance of the weight of sin is found in *Everyman*. The character Good Dedes cannot at first accompany Everyman: "Here I lye, colde in the grounde. / Thy synnes hath me sore bounde, / That I can not sterve / . . . I can not stande, veryly". For Everyman, this is to his "soules heuynes". Only after Everyman finds Knowledge and Confession can Good Dedes "walke and go".¹¹

Two Old Testament passages are worth returning to which especially dramatize the weight of sin. In Isaiah's peculiar imagery, the world itself plays an unsuccessful Atlas to a load of iniquity: "The earth staggers like a drunken man, / it sways like a hut; / its transgression lies heavy [gravabit] upon it, / and it falls, and will not rise again" (Isa. xxiv 20). Psalm 38 likewise describes the failed effort of the speaker to keep his feet beneath the weight of sin:

For my iniquities . . .
 weigh like a burden too heavy for me [*sicut onus grave gravatae sunt*].
 . . . I am utterly bowed down and prostrate . . .
 I am utterly spent and crushed;
 I groan because of the tumult of my heart . . .
 My heart throbs, my strength fails me . . .
 For I am ready to fall,
 and my pain is ever with me (vv. 4-17).

These two passages are virtual stage directions for the four York soldiers. Representing all men, they struggle beneath the weight of both their own sins and those of their forefathers.

Of course, this reading is not assured without showing that it was indeed common to regard Christ as bearing or carrying man's sin upon the cross. We have already seen that in Hebraic tradition one group of people could bear the sin of another group - their ancestors, but without atoning effect. In this instance, guilt and punishment are shared, not transferred. But throughout the Old Testament, figures are to be found who bear guilt by proxy. Aaron as high priest must eat the sin offering, "since it . . . has been

given to you that you may bear [*portetis*] the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord" (Lev. x 17). The law also provided that a literal scapegoat would periodically "bear [*portaverit*] all their iniquities upon him" and be sent into the wilderness, the symbolic region of death (Lev. xvi 22). The prophet Ezekiel was instructed to bear symbolically the sin of Israel: "Then lie upon your left side, and you shall lay [*pones*] the punishment of the house of Israel upon it; . . . so long shall you bear [*portabis*] the punishment of the house of Israel" (Ezek. iv 4-5).

This strain reaches its poetic climax in the familiar words of Isaiah 53, early recognized by the Church as prophetic of the crucifixion and atonement: "Surely he has borne [*tulit*] our griefs / and carried [*portavit*] our sorrows" (Isa. liii 4). In all, the sufferer in verses 4-12 is five times said to bear our iniquities. That Christ is the sufferer who bore our sin is specifically attested by two New Testament passages. The writer of Hebrews puts Christ in the tradition of Aaron, at once high priest and sacrifice, "offered once to bear the sins of many" (Heb. ix 28).¹² Peter's first epistle glosses the atonement with the Isaiah text. In particular: "He himself carried up [*pertulit*] our sins in his body to the tree" (I Pet. ii 24).

Medieval writers kept this figure of the atonement alive. "What feeling of pity was it that compelled You to shoulder the burden [*ferres*] of our sins, and though sinless, to undergo death?"¹³ This question occurs in a hymn sung at vespers and lauds of the Ascension, composed in the seventh or eighth century. A fourteenth-century English lyric echoes closely: "What mil<s>folnesse awalde be / þat oure sunnes bere / So bitter deth to þolien?"¹⁴ When Aquinas discusses the crucifixion in his *Summa*, he quotes "bearing" passages from Isaiah 53 four times.¹⁵ In a twelfth- or thirteenth-century English sermon on the crucifixion, Isaiah 53 is likewise followed: Christ both "took" and "bore" our sins.¹⁶ In a twelfth-century English homily, "Christ bore the penalty". In another twelfth-century sermon, the devil graphically tries "to prevent any man from throwing the guilt of his sins upon God".¹⁷ Isaiah is still quoted in a sermon authorized by Queen Elizabeth for Good Friday, with characteristic English vividness: "He bare (sayth Esai) all our sores [sorrows] and infirmities upon his own backe".¹⁸ One could spend a lifetime searching out more recorded instances of the weight of sin and the burden of the cross. Those cited here are few of many. Indeed, the genius of the York dramatist was to reclaim vigour for a cliché.

Of course, the apostles and church fathers used several other atonement figures as well. Christ washes and cleanses us from stain and defilement. He heals our infection, sickness, or infirmity. He brings light to our darkness, bread to our hunger, water to our thirst. He seeks and saves the lost. He frees the slave or captive in chains or fetters. Or, he ransoms the captive. No single one of these metaphors enjoys special prominence in the New Testament. But the church fathers and medieval writers refer most often to the ransoming image, perhaps because it emphasizes the

"cost" of Christ's sacrifice. Other metaphors picture the grace that is given, but not all show the effort with which grace is provided. This ransoming image, although the most common in medieval thought, is hard to dramatize. Characters in medieval drama are forever swearing "by Him that me has boght", but this sort of monetary redemption is never communicated by the action.¹⁹

Other atonement metaphors, however, are acted out in cycle drama. In the York Passion alone, when Longinus receives his sight he is both cured of his infirmity of blindness and given light in his darkness. Perhaps we may even see his eyes as "washed" in Christ's blood. And when harrowing hell, Christ sends a light into the darkness, and frees those captive there. The cross-carrying episode, then, merely acts out yet another standard atonement metaphor - one that is well-suited to the possible action of a crucifixion drama. Christ himself cannot dramatize the burden of sin, for he is necessarily a passive figure, affixed to the cross. But the soldiers can try to carry the cross, and in this invented action, they can show us the "wikkid weght" when Christ cannot.

The comic realism of this cross-carrying episode need not be prized solely for its own sake. Neither need we devalue it, as Lucy Toulmin Smith does in referring to "the account of the Crucifixion with its too great realism".²⁰ Rather, we may share a conclusion which Clifford Davidson draws concerning other plays in the York passion sequence. It can apply to the Crucifixion pageant as well: "The final effect of this drama is not to focus attention only on the particulars, but rather to point to the truths of the Christian story as these are to be made applicable to the lives of all those who look upon the spectacle".²¹ Each spectator has his own burden to contribute to the cross.

One last and strangely inverted application of this episode comes full circle to the prayer of Christ upon which Kolve bases his explication: "Forgiffis þes men þat dois me pyne" (l.260). By means of the cross, Christ offers forgiveness to all - but particularly to those who struggle beneath great weights. Even as the soldiers gasp under his heaviness, Christ offers them a lighter load to carry which, paradoxically, is himself: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mat. xi 28-30).

NOTES

- ¹ Eleanor Prosser, *Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays* (Stanford, 1961) pp.8-11.
- ² V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford and London, 1966) pp.175-205.
- ³ *York Plays*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (Oxford, 1885, repr. New York, 1963) *Play XXXV. Crucifixio Christi* ll.172, 178. All further references to this play are to this edition, with line numbers cited in the text of the article. The new edition of the *York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London, 1982) was not available at the time of writing.
- ⁴ *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans. Isa Ragusa (Princeton, 1961) p.331.
- ⁵ Lev. xxiv 15, Revised Standard Version (Vulgate in square brackets). All further biblical references are given thus, with citations in the text.
- ⁶ Jerome's Vulgate does not preserve the sense of "to bear" in these last two passages, but they serve well to illustrate the Hebrew concepts which inform many other passages.
- ⁷ *The Lay Folks' Catechism*, ed. Thomas Frederick Simmons and Henry Edward Nolloth, EETS, OS 118 (London, 1901) pp.2, 4.
- ⁸ Joseph Connelly, *Hymns of the Roman Liturgy* (Westminster, Md.; London, New York and Toronto, 1957) pp.34, 38.
- ⁹ *Old English Homilies of the Twelfth Century*, ed. Richard Morris, EETS, OS 53 (London, 1873) p.28.
- ¹⁰ *Middle English Sermons*, ed. Woodburn O. Ross, EETS, OS 209 (London, 1940) p.104.
- ¹¹ *Everyman*, ed. A.C. Cawley (Manchester, 1961) ll.486-8, 498, 505, 619.
- ¹² Jerome, however, uses *exhaurienda* "to remove". Here as elsewhere the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor are so familiar that they are freely interchanged in his translation.
- ¹³ Connelly, *Hymns*, pp.102-3.
- ¹⁴ *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Carleton Brown (Oxford, 1924) p.27.
- ¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 54, ed. Richard T.A. Murphy (London and New York, 1965) 3a.46.6, p.28; 3a.47.3, p.62; 3a.49.3, p.102; 3a.52.1, p.154.
- ¹⁶ *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, ed. Richard Morris, EETS, OS 34 (London, 1868) p.120.
- ¹⁷ Morris, *Old English Homilies of the Twelfth Century*, pp.44, 106.

- 18 *The Second Tome of Homilies* (London, 1574; Ann Arbor, 1964) p.359. (STC 13670.)
- 19 At best, the ransoming image emerges in the dialogue of the Wakefield *Extraccio Animarum* when Christ explains to Satan that he is entitled to take the patriarchs out of hell. Satan receives nothing in return, but he can keep all souls past and future who defy the law of Christ. This consolation temporarily comforts him: "Now here my hand, I hold me payde, / these poyntys ar playnly for my prow [profit]" (*The Towneley Plays*, ed. George England, EETS, ES 71 (London, 1897) *Play XXV. The Deliverance of Souls*, ll.343-4). Thus Satan speaks as if he has received payment, but the play upholds the orthodox conclusion that if Christ paid a ransom, it was not to the devil. This play, including the line quoted, is substantially the same as York XXXVII, *The Harrowing of Hell*.
- 20 *York Plays*, p.xlix.
- 21 "The Realism of the York Realist and the York Passion", *Speculum* 50 (1975) p.274.