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# THE TOWNELEY *PROCESSUS TALENTORUM*: A SURVEY AND INTERPRETATION

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The text of a paper originally read at an international colloquium, "The Towneley Plays: the Text", held in conjunction with a production of the plays at the Victoria College of the University of Toronto, 25 May 1985.

The *Processus Talentorum* (the *Talents*) is the twenty-fourth pageant in the Towneley cycle, interpolated between the *Crucifixion* and the *Deliverance of Souls*.<sup>1</sup> Its main themes are the Torturers' obsession with Christ's seamless coat; their dicing for possession of it; Pilate's full share in the action, leading finally to his obtaining the coat; and the Torturers' sudden rejection of dicing and their conversion to Christ at the end of the pageant.

This pageant springs several surprises. The first is its incipit, in which *Processus Talentorum* is an error for *Processus Talorum*, i.e. "pageant of the dice". Apparently the scribe thought he was about to copy a pageant about dicing for money; and although it is clearly nothing of the sort, he repeated his error in the explicit. *Processus* meaning "play, pageant, performance" is rarely used as a dramatic term. Apart from three other Towneley pageants so described, I know of only two other examples of its use: *Processus Satanae* (c.1570)<sup>2</sup> and *Processus Belial*.<sup>3</sup> As for the emended word *Talorum*, it is the genitive plural of *talus* "ankle-bone", a die for gaming originally made from the ankle-bones of the hind feet of certain animals. Hence the reference to dice in the *Talents* as "bones" or "byched bones".

## *Criticism of the pageant*

The criticism of the *Talents* began five years before the Surtees Society's publication of the text in *The Towneley Mysteries* (1836).<sup>4</sup> In 1831 J.P. Collier gave an account of the pageant in *The History of English Dramatic Poetry to the Time of Shakespeare*: he called the manuscript, then in the possession of the Towneley family, the "Towneley Collection" or "Widkirk Collection". He wrongly numbered the pageant as the twenty-second because he overlooked Plays 5 (*Isaac*) and 18 (*Christ and the Doctors*), both of which are incomplete at the beginning. Collier was a notable pioneer in Towneley criticism, for the only Towneley pageant published in its entirety before his *History* appeared was the *Iudicium*, edited by Francis Douce for the Roxburghe Club in 1822.<sup>5</sup> Collier was the first

to observe that the *Talents* must be a later interpolation in the cycle since the gospel incident of the drawing of lots for Christ's coat has already been dramatised in the preceding pageant (23/498-515).<sup>6</sup>

After this modest beginning nothing more is heard of the *Talents* until the Towneley cycle was published by the EETS in 1897. George England, who was responsible for the transcription, failed to restore the correct shape of some of the seven-line stanzas in the *Talents*: this task has now been performed by Martin Stevens in the text we have prepared for a new EETS edition of Towneley.

The first important contribution to the study of the *Talents* was made by Mendal G. Frampton in 1944.<sup>7</sup> Frampton plausibly hypothesised that the extant text is made up of what he calls the "original play" (in seven-line stanzas) and two interpolations, one of which (comprising the opening and closing stanzas) has every appearance of being the work of the Wakefield Master. Frampton also established the probability that the original play was derived from a York pageant on the same subject which was discarded in 1422. Certainly there is a striking similarity between the subject-matter of the original play and the 1422 description of the discarded Millers' pageant of York.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the active involvement of Pilate in the dicing in both York and Towneley is a feature not found elsewhere in medieval literature.<sup>9</sup> The probable York derivation of the original play of the *Talents* has been strongly supported by Peter Meredith,<sup>10</sup> who has removed a formidable objection to it: namely, the linguistic evidence assembled by Professor Stevens<sup>11</sup> which seemed to point to the composition of the original play in a non-northern dialect different from that of York.

An outstanding study of the Towneley Pilate was published in 1950 by Arnold Williams.<sup>12</sup> It was Williams who made us realise that Towneley, unlike the other English cycles, made Pilate "bad, all bad" and built up his character as a dramatic contrast to Christ. Williams also showed that the Pilate of the *Talents* is an offshoot of the medieval legend of the life and death of the evil Pilate.<sup>13</sup> This legend makes him the possessor of Christ's seamless coat, which has the power to protect its wearer from harm; the *Talents* "is really the story of how the coat came into Pilate's possession".<sup>14</sup>

V.A. Kolve<sup>15</sup> contested Williams' conclusion that the consistent characterisation of Pilate in five Towneley pageants as a wholly evil man, in direct contrast to Christ, is the "supreme achievement of Towneley".<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, Kolve condemned this treatment of Pilate as an "artistic oversimplification",<sup>17</sup> an aberration from the collective portrait of "natural man" ("a mixture of good and bad") who is opposed to Christ in the rest of the cycle.

Rosemary Woolf<sup>18</sup> was puzzled to know why a Towneley reviser (probably the Wakefield Master) had given the relatively minor episode of the dicing such full treatment. She suggested that Christ's seamless coat may signify Christ's body, and that the episode of Pilate and the Torturers "quarrelling, swearing and dicing over the garment" may be read as an allegory of "evildoers throughout the ages . . . who rend Christ's body, the Church, or crucify him

anew".<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Woolf also pointed out that the Torturers' moralising on the evil consequences of dicing was a favourite pulpit theme. To confirm this, one only has to note the parallels, including verbal correspondences, between the *Talents* on the one hand and the *Pardoner's Tale* and *Parson's Tale*<sup>20</sup> on the other:

3 *Tortor*: What commys of dysyng, I pray you hark after,  
Bot los of good in lakyng and oft-tymes  
mens slaughter? (*Talents* 385-6)

Hasard is verray mooder of . . .  
. . . manslaughtere, and wast also  
Of catel . . . (*Pardoner's Tale* 591, 593-4)

Now comth hasardrie . . . of which comth . . . wast  
of goodes, . . . and somtyme manslaughtere.  
(*Parson's Tale* 793)

The blasphemy associated with dicing is illustrated by such oaths as the First Torturer's *a, his armes* in the *Talents* (318) and the dicer's "By Goddes armes" in the *Pardoner's Tale* (654). And the dice are described in both works as *byched bones* (24/319, 330; *Pardoner's Tale* 656) - an abusive phrase apparently not found elsewhere in medieval English literature.

Last but not least, John Gardner<sup>21</sup> was very much concerned - some would say "obsessed" - with the Satanic figures in the Towneley pageants. He discovered, in the words of A.P. Rossiter,<sup>22</sup> that "sometimes these bullies have their own diabolism". He saw the *Talents* as a continuation of the conflict between Pilate and Christ: a deadly struggle in which "Satan-Mahowne is a false God figure and Pilate, his viceregent, is a false Christ-as-King".<sup>23</sup>

In the rest of this short paper I have limited myself to a few topics that may throw some light on the meaning and staging of the *Talents*. I do this under four headings: Pilate as Antichrist; the influence of Vulgate Psalm xxi (the "Passion psalm"); number symbolism; and staging. I have added, by way of conclusion, a paragraph concerned with the particulars and generals of meaning.

#### *Pilate as Antichrist*

Gardner, I believe, arrived at the right conclusion in seeing Mahowne as "a false God figure" and Pilate as "a false Christ-as-King". The evidence for this, although Gardner does not give it, is found in Pilate's opening stanzas, which Arnold Williams wrongly dismisses as having "little to do with the rest of the play".<sup>24</sup> Here Pilate describes himself in terms proper only to God or Christ as *dominus dominorum* (10); he is a man of god-like nature and majesty (*vir deitatis / Et maiestatis*, 3-4); he claims to have been sanctified by *Greatt god* (29), presumably Mahowne, whom Pilate and the Torturers swear by or make vows to at least eleven times during the course of the pageant; and he insists on being obeyed everywhere like a latter-day King David (*regi reliquo quasi Daud*, 30). Pilate's comparison of himself with David may have a double

significance: King David was regarded by the Fathers as the type of Christ, and so Pilate is making the false claim that he is a Christ figure; again, the mention of David recalls Psalm xxi, the source of the prophecy which is fulfilled in the episode of the gaming for Christ's coat in the New Testament (Psalm xxi 19 (Vulgate), xxii 18 (A.V.); Matthew xxvii 35, John xix 23-4). Furthermore, in the opening stanzas of the pageant Pilate twice calls himself *most myghty* (37, 58),<sup>25</sup> a phrase picked up by the Third Torturer near the end of the pageant and used by him of Christ. The Third Torturer, who has won the game of dice but lost the coat to the grasping Pilate, transfers his allegiance from Pilate to Christ who is *That lord . . . most myghty* (390). At the end of the pageant Pilate may seem to be victorious: he has got Christ's coat, and he can afford to be sarcastic at the expense of the moralising Torturers, calling them *clerkys . . . most conyng* (395) and giving them empty promises of power and friendship. But, like Herod at the end of *Magnus Herodes*, the arch-deceiver of others is now a self-deceiver: in spite of his apparent triumph, he is in fact left alone with Mahowne, his followers are disloyal to him, and the coat he sets such store by will not save him from a wretched end. For, according to the legend of the evil Pilate, the Emperor Tiberius deprives him of the magic coat and Pilate commits suicide in order to escape a more hideous death. We can say of Pilate in his moment of apparent triumph: "The fals gyler of teyn now goys he begylde" (13/713).

#### *The influence of Vulgate Psalm xxi*

Psalm xxi, to which I referred above, has a pervasive influence on the *Talents*. It is the psalm of which St Augustine wrote: "that psalm . . . wherein Christ prophesies of His passion by David's mouth".<sup>26</sup> Christ himself on the Cross quoted its opening words "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (cf. Matthew xxvii 46, Mark xv 34), and both Matthew and John describe the casting of lots for Christ's coat as a fulfilment of scripture, i.e. of Psalm xxi 19 (A.V. xxii 18): "They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture." The seventh verse of this psalm reads in the A.V.: "All they that see me laugh me to scorn", while the First Torturer says of Christ: *I loghe hym vnto hethyng* (85). It may be too fanciful to equate the "ravenging and . . . roaring lion" (*leos rapiens et rugiens*) of the psalm with Pilate, or the dogs that encompass the unfortunate man (Psalm xxi 17) with the Torturers. But surely there is a parallel to be seen between the "conversion of the nations" towards the end of the psalm and the conversion of the Torturers from Mahowne to God and from Pilate to Christ. Compare the following two passages:

All the ends of the world shall remember and  
turn unto the Lord: and all the kindreds of the  
nations shall worship before thee.

For the kingdom is the Lord's: and he is the  
governor among the nations (A.V. Ps. xxii 27-8)

and:



The properties include a bed (65, 177) throne (196) and *dais* (230) for Pilate; a *fawchon* (272); straws for drawing lots (291), and three dice (299).

Although the costumes are not described in detail, Christ's seamless coat is given a bewildering variety of names: *garmente* (101), *cote* (139), *gowne* (162), *harnes* (242), *frog* (305), and *wede* (332). For some idea of the costumes worn by Pilate and the Torturers we need to go to the Coventry and Chester records. For example, Coventry (1490) gives a vivid detail of "iiiij Jakketts of blake bokeram for þe tormentors with nayles & dysse upon þem",<sup>28</sup> while Chester (1557-8) notes the mending of "the tormentors heydes (i.e. head-coverings, head-pieces)".<sup>29</sup> Coventry also records sums of money spent on Pilate's hat, gloves, gown, doublet, and "hede".<sup>30</sup>

One other detail of staging interest is that Pilate's use of the word *mytyng* (186) "puny fellow, shrimp" in addressing his Counsellor (Consultus) may humorously mean that Pilate himself was of small stature and Counsellor a tall, strong person. For line 209 spoken by Pilate to Counsellor, *Sett the with sorow, then semys thou the les* (which may be translated "Sit down, bad luck to you, and then you will seem smaller") suggests that a tall person acted the part of Counsellor. Again, Counsellor had to be strong enough, and Pilate small enough, for Counsellor to lay Pilate on his bed (65) and afterwards lift him up and place him on his throne (195-6).

#### *Particulars and generals*

I have sometimes asked myself whether attention to, and understanding of, the particulars of a pageant are essential to a sound interpretation of the general meaning. Some critics seem able to hypothesise convincingly about a pageant as a whole without showing much concern for the smaller units of meaning, the individual words and phrases. John Gardner is one such critic: he shoots "feathered arrows of thought here and there into problems [and] undoubtedly reveals much that is missed by a judicious and logical procedure".<sup>31</sup> Thus he is essentially right about Pilate as an Antichrist figure, even though he gives little or no evidence from the pageant in support of this insight. Again, Martial Rose misunderstands and therefore mistranslates details of the Second Torturer's speech near the end of the pageant (367-84), but this does not prevent him from reaching the right conclusion about the staging of the final scene:

The moralizing at the end of the play (358-93), breath-taking in its sudden conversion of the seamiest villains of the cycle, nevertheless should be played straight. It is easy and superficially effective to play it tongue-in-cheek, with the Torturers leering at their own hypocritical piety ['How thynk ye by this?' (393)], but to treat their very last appearance in the Cycle cynically is to misrepresent the essential spirit of a great religious drama.<sup>32</sup>

I find it rather unnerving that people like Gardner and Rose

can ignore or misunderstand the particulars of the pageant and yet have valuable insights and arrive at right conclusions. But Gardner, for one, can and does slip up. For example, he found the Torturers' sudden and unexpected condemnation of dicing irrelevant because their real enemy was not the mere dice but Fortune, represented by Pilate.<sup>33</sup> In fact, as the words of the Second Torturer make plain (369 ff.), he is well aware of the part played by Fortune in manipulating the dice against him. Because Fortune is a false god, as the medieval preacher so often proclaims,<sup>34</sup> the Second Torturer is not simply condemning the dice but also his former submission to a false god by playing at dice - a non-Christian practice actuated by "a likerousnesse in herte to have erthely thynges".<sup>35</sup>

On balance, I believe it is safer to use one's arrows of thought sparingly, especially if their feathers are a bit bedraggled, and to proceed cautiously from the particular to the general, from the smaller to the larger units of meaning. This prosaic method of inductive criticism can sometimes produce surprising results. What could be more surprising than to find a crap game metamorphosed into a struggle for souls, ending in Christ's victory and the defeat of Antichrist?

NOTES

- 1 See *The Towneley Cycle: A Facsimile of Huntington MS HM 1*, ed. A.C. Cawley and Martin Stevens (Leeds, 1976) ff.92-7.
- 2 See Ian Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: A Chronological Topography to 1558* (Toronto, 1984) pp.180, 846.
- 3 See *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, V, ed. A.E. Hartung (New Haven, 1975) p.1381.
- 4 See Martin Stevens, "The Manuscript of the *Towneley Plays*: Its History and Editions", *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 67 (1973) pp.242-3.
- 5 Excerpts from the *Processus Noe* and *Magnus Herodes* were published in 1818 by J.H. Markland in his edition of two of the Chester plays; see Stevens, p.238.
- 6 Line references are to *The Towneley Plays*, ed. G. England and A.W. Pollard, EETS ES 71 (1897) except those for the *Talents*, which are to the Cawley-Stevens text (see above, pp.105-30).
- 7 "The *Processus Talentorum* (Towneley XXIV)", *PMLA* 59 (1944) pp.646-54.
- 8 See York, ed. Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, *Records of Early English Drama*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1979) I, p.48. For the text and translation see above, p.105.
- 9 It seems to have been assumed that the Torturers' rejection of drawing lots for Christ's coat in favour of dicing for it is a feature found only in Towneley, but in fact it occurs elsewhere, e.g. in *Le Mystère de la Passion d'Arnoul Greban*, ed. Gaston Paris and Gaston Raynaud (Paris, 1878) ll.25618 ff.
- 10 "The York Millers' Pageant and the *Towneley Processus Talentorum*", *Medieval English Theatre* 4 (1982) pp.104-14.
- 11 "The Composition of the *Towneley Talents Play*: a linguistic examination", *JEGP* 58 (1959) pp.423-33
- 12 Arnold Williams, *The Characterization of Pilate in the Towneley Plays* (East Lansing [Mich.], 1950).
- 13 For English metrical versions of the life of Pilate see Carleton Brown and R.H. Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York, 1943), 2755. The death of Pilate is dramatised in the *Cornish Ordinalia*: see *The Ancient Cornish Drama*, ed. E. Norris, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1859) II, pp.121-79, and M. Harris, *The Cornish Ordinalia: A Medieval Dramatic Trilogy* (Washington, D.C., 1969) pp.221-40. For Latin versions of the legend see *Mors Pilati*, ed. C. Tischendorf, *Evangelia apocrypha* (1876) pp.456-8, trans. M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1924) pp.157-9; Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, ed. Th. Graesse (3rd ed., Breslau, 1890) cap. LIII, pp.231-5.
- 14 Williams, p.10.
- 15 V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London, 1966).

- 16 Williams, p.16.
- 17 Kolve, p.233.
- 18 *The English Mystery Plays* (London, 1972).
- 19 Woolf, pp.267-8.
- 20 Chaucer quotations are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (2nd ed., Cambridge [Mass.], 1957).
- 21 *The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1974).
- 22 *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans* (London, 1950) p.70.
- 23 Gardner, p.119.
- 24 Williams, p.61.
- 25 Another mighty one is the heathen god Mahowne, who is several times described as *myghty* or *most myghty*.
- 26 *The City of God*, John Healey's translation, ed. R.V.G. Tasker (London, 1945) II, p.170 (bk.XVII, ch.XVII).
- 27 See H. Jenner, *Christian Symbolism* (London, 1910) pp.164-5; G. Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art* (London, 1961) p.154; V.F. Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism* (New York, 1969) pp.84-5, 116, 131, 178.
- 28 See *Coventry*, ed. R.W. Ingram, *Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto, 1981) p.73.
- 29 See *Chester*, ed. L.M. Clopper, *Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto, 1979) p.60.
- 30 Ingram, pp.63, 181, 214, 240, 288.
- 31 H.R. Patch, *On Rereading Chaucer* (Cambridge [Mass.], 1939) p.9.
- 32 Martial Rose, ed., *The Wakefield Mystery Plays* (London, 1961) p.457.
- 33 Gardner, p.118.
- 34 See G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1966) p.182: "For the game of Dice or knuckle-bones was a theatre-game of the Ribalds in Rome, who believed in false gods, one of which gods or goddesses was the god or goddess of Fortune, to whose gift and grace they imputed any good piece of luck that befell them" (quotation from Robert Rypon).
- 35 *Parson's Tale*, 741.