

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

David Mills, 'The Towneley Plays or The Towneley Cycle?',
Leeds Studies in English, n.s. 17 (1986), 95-104

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=123662&silo_library=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

"THE TOWNELEY PLAYS" OR "THE TOWNELEY CYCLE"?

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.

By DAVID MILLS

In this paper I wish to offer some preliminary thoughts about a large critical issue: how far is it valid and helpful to regard "cycle" as a term of generic definition? I wish to give focus to those thoughts by considering how the implication of generic coherence implicit in the term "cycle" relates to the dramatic diversity of the Towneley play-collection.

The manuscript containing that collection, Huntington MS HM 1, is almost emblematic of the problem of coherence - seven plays incomplete, four plays out of sequence, twenty-eight leaves lost, probable censorship of three or four plays between plays 29 and 30 in the manuscript.¹ Rosemary Woolf states: "A cycle that has neither a Fall of Man nor a Nativity is necessarily broken-backed".² But beyond the problems of physical loss are those in the surviving material - why, for example, the unique two-part *Jacob* play; why two alternative *Shepherds'* plays, mutually aware yet independent; why the isolated comedy of *The Talents*, overlapping with the same episode in the preceding play (23/498-515)?³ The methodical listing of metrical forms in the EETS introduction further alerts us to the marked stylistic diversity both across the collection and within individual plays.⁴ And there is a corresponding diversity of dramatic mode, from the literalising comedy of the so-called "Master's" work to the formalised expository drama of *The Baptism*.⁵ Moreover, scholars have traced patterns of influence, borrowing and interaction behind such diversity - at least five plays taken from York; five plays in the Master's stanza; the *Jacob* play, which Ten Brink long ago postulated had enjoyed an independent existence.⁶ Each brings its own style and "voice" to the collection - and, attuned to them, we detect them, sometimes harshly discordant, in other parts of the collection. Miss Woolf is right in description, if not in critical expectation, in denying the collection organic unity.⁷ The manuscript could almost be an idiosyncratic assemblage of material from a variety of sources into a sort of presentation volume, using a Creation-Doomsday framework of organisation.

The usefulness of that framework is that it permits precisely this degree of fragmentation and diversity to be contained.

L.D. Benson's comment on Arthurian cyclic romances seems to be readily transferable to drama-cycles:

A medieval reader did not have to read all the parts of a cycle to know a cycle existed or even to know what it and the "livre du latin" that all claimed to be translating contained. The authors of the prose romances lost no opportunity to establish the "cyclic" character of their works and to specify the exact relation between their individual romances and the whole works of which they were parts.⁹

This thesis seems to envisage a cycle not as a controlling literary structure but as a mental frame of reference, held in the memory and swung into place in response to specific signals from the text.

For play-cycles have traditionally been considered to have two interlocking frames. One is historical - the complete narrative of history contained in the library of books from Genesis to Apocalypse in the Bible, amplified by other authorised accounts and commentaries. The other is generic, the dramatisation of selections from that narrative initiated by the play of *Creation* and closed by the play of *Doomsday*. But in 1966 V.A. Kolve influentially developed this double reference into a generic definition, proposing the derivation of a controlling Corpus Christi genre from the historical frame by the conscious application of figural interpretation and the patterning of time into the Ages of the World. An audience's mind was thus imprinted with a "proto-cycle" which conditioned expectation and response. When the proto-cycle sought its Aristotelean realisation, it might at any time reach back into the historical frame for additional material.¹⁰

Professor Benson's more flexible, less "goal-seeking" formulation appeals to me because it suggests that cycle-form is a product of mental reconstitution and that one function of a cycle-narrative or play might be to excite such a reconstitution. The audience for a cycle was not necessarily expected to witness the whole Creation-Doomsday series. The cycle-frame might take three or four days to complete, as at Chester; or a series of years, as in the St. Ann's Day play of the Digby MS or the two-part N-town *Passion Play*.¹¹ When Chester's mayor, Thomas Bellin "caused the Sheapeardes playe to be played at the hie Crosse" in 1577, moreover, its cyclic connexion must surely have been recognised and the performance before Lord Derby two years after the suppression of the cycle would therefore make a political statement.¹² The freedom of medieval and Tudor producers to break down cycle-form, even to the individual play, is simply the correlative of what we still observe - that modern audiences select what they will watch, with what degree of attention, and for how long. It is for them to relate as they will the performed part, the play, to the conceptual whole, the cycle-frame, held in their mind.

It is perhaps not surprising that a dramatic celebration associated with "the glorious remembrance" of the Feast of Corpus Christi should itself be a "calling to mind".¹³ In an oral culture, Man has only a tenuous hold upon his meaningful past and

must constantly rehearse its significant fragments if he is not to be imprisoned within the confines of present experience. Remembrance of a cycle-frame is an act not of scholarly retrieval but of active re-creation, a means of re-animating the present with the power of the past. If festal celebration is its normal medium, repetition is its natural device.

Memory in the Towneley Cycle

This process of reconstitution seems to me to be incorporated into the dramatic diversity of our Towneley collection. The man who succeeds in Towneley tends to be the one who recognises and remembers what is significant and who bases his expectations and conduct upon those memories. Abel's devotion for example, derives from his memory of the tithing enjoined by our "elders" (2/101); he expects "blis withoutten end" (81) to result. Noah's expectations of retribution spring from his remembrance of God's past conduct when His grace was spurned (3/1-72). Abraham's plea for grace follows his recollection of the Fall and its consequences (4/1-48). God retraces the remembered track of events since the Fall and uses it to direct His future conduct:

But yit, I myn, I hight hym grace
Oyll of mercy I can hym heyt . . .
Man for man, tre for tre,
Madyne for madyne; thus shal it be. (10/8-9, 31-2)

The newly-risen Christ recalls His Passion to stir the audience's memory and direct their future conduct (26/250-85). Thomas' doubt prompts a sequence of remembrance which functions not to promote dramatic action but as a collective act of recollection (28/167-311). Repeated remembrance runs through Towneley's dramatic diversity, serving as the textual signal to link the individual play to a wider cyclic frame.

These dramatised acts of remembrance reach out to events in the historical frame that are never played. They invite the audience to recognise the selective, fragmented nature of the play-material they are witnessing and to search into their own memories of that historical frame. So the three torturers accuse Christ before Pilate of His unplayed miracles - the wedding at Cana; walking on water and stilling the storm; healing the leper; the Centurion's son; the blind man (22/152-78). Their charges alert the audience to the mass of recorded history which cannot be played but must remain alive in their memory. Inevitably dramatised acts of remembrance may also simultaneously reach back into the play-sequence, suggesting links between the dramatised events. Abraham remembers Noah (4/25-8) as well as the unplayed Destruction of Sodom (4/29-32); and God, at the point of Incarnation, remembers Abraham ("To abraham I am in dett" (10/41)) as well as the played prophets (10/46-50). The Shepherds can also remember the prophets (12/332-403, 13/674-82), played and unplayed, the Devils the liberation of Lazarus (25/160-79). Such figures provide the audience with models of how to "read" and use the plays.

Towneley, in fact, offers a continuing and cumulative pattern of cyclic links of this kind. And such a prominent network of cyclic reference can sustain a high degree of textual diversity and fragmentation. An episode removed from the series by a producer or censor, or mutilated in some way, represents the total or partial transfer of material from the generic to the historical frame and invites the audience, producer or reader to undertake an imaginative reconstitution of the missing or damaged sections.¹⁴ For example, though there is no *Fall of Man*, allusions to that action pervade the cycle and inform its frame - so much so that we may be sure, for example, that the expulsion from Eden did contain a promise of ultimate redemption.

The Prison of the Present

What is now plain and clear [says St Augustine in his *Confessions*] is that neither future nor past things are in existence, and that it is not correct to say that there are three periods of time: past, present and future. Perhaps it would be proper to say that there are three periods of time: the present of things past, the present of things present, and the present of things future. For, these three are in the soul, and I do not see them elsewhere: the present of things past is memory; the present of things present is immediate vision; the present of things future is expectation.¹⁵

For Towneley's heroes, the keys to the cycle-frame, present memory determines present expectation. But the plays repeatedly realise also the plight of those without either memory or expectation, locked in the present of things present, their immediate and unique experience. While Abel recalls the tithing-injunction of our "elders", Cain holds to his immediate experience of dearth:

When all mens corn was fayre in feld
Then was myne not worth a neld. (2/121-2)

While Noah recalls how God has previously punished disobedience, his wife sees present want and masculine fecklessness:

When we swete or swynk,
Thou dos what thou thynk.
Yit of mete and of drynk
haue we veray skant. (3/195-8)

Both the concerns and the language of these two viewpoints are distinct. Their representatives cannot really communicate with each other. And present experience has its own validity which memory and expectation will not touch - the Flood is not seen to resolve the Noah-family's food-problems; the vision of power and plenty - "with peasse and with plente, with ryches and menee" (12/400-1) - anticipated by Primus Pastor in *Prima Pastorum* is not the purpose of

Christ. The present is always with us - the remembered past and expected future, in Towneley, are exceptional disruptions:

Thou spekis euer of sorow;
 God send the onys thi fill (3/206-7, my italics)

says Mrs Noah, seeing no reason to doubt that Noah will - as usual - be wrong.

But the potential for that disruption threatens the present. The eternal present of power in which Caesar Augustus lives is always challenged by the collective memory and expectation of the people:

Thys haue I herd syn many day,
 ffolk in the contre tell;
 That in this land shuld dwell a may,
 The which sall bere a chylde, thay say,
 That shall youre force downe fell. (9/68-72)

Since the experienced present does not offer a sufficient context for such events, they must be viewed as threats, partly because present Man can only literalise them. How can Christ destroy the temple and rebuild it? Caiaphas insists upon his personal experience and the irreducible concreteness of the structure:

The masons I knewe, that hewed it, I say,
 so wyse;
 That hewed ilka stone. (21/76-8)

By the same token, the consolations held in the remembered past are threatened by the pressures of present vision. Thomas has access to the same memories as his fellow-disciples, but he cannot move beyond the finality of what he has experienced:

Dede has determyd his dayes; his lyfe noght trow I may.
 (28/251)

Only the physical presence of Christ will convince. Joseph recalls in detail the marvellous circumstance of his betrothal to Mary (10/277-68) but its meaning is negated by the fact of her pregnancy. The messenger was not an angel, for

A. heuenly thyng, for sothe, is he,
 And she is erthly; this may not be,
 It is som othere man. (10/296-8)

Only the angel's reassurances will convince. Even the Virgin Mary, under present grief, denies the memory of her former joy:

Gabriell, that good sum tyme thou can me grete
 And then I vnderstud thi wordys that were so swete . . .
 Now hyngys he here on rude. Where is that thou me hight?
 (23/435-6, 440, my italics)

John searches his own memory to comfort her:

ffayn wold I comforth the;
Me mynnys my master with mowth, told vnto his menyee . . .
(23/373-4)

But only Christ's reaffirmation of purpose will console.

At such repeated moments Towneley realises for its audience the conflicting claims of present vision and of the remembered promise of the past and challenges them to examine the relevance in their own present lives of the Christian faith by which they claim to live. Through its dramatic diversity, the collection poses rather than resolves an issue. Earthbound man and enlightened man speak to the audience in distinct and mutually unintelligible voices, each with its own undeniable logic - the daily problems of suffering and of political and economic survival balanced against the claims of God. It is for the audience to find the balance or synthesis and reconstitute past, present and future, as Augustine suggests, in the soul.

The Drama in Towneley

More important to us than this grandiose thesis, however, is the kind of drama which it contains. Obviously it is not naturalistic. Figures like Herod the Great or Caiaphas who occupy an unchanging present are incapable of self-knowledge or development but stand rather as great caricatures whose natural speech is concrete and colloquial and whose natural expression is violence. Figures like Abel or Abraham, who hold to the obligations imposed by the past, are equally unchanging but, lacking the immediacy of a present reference, they stand as emblematic figures, spokespersons for a given viewpoint which they articulate in a - for want of a better word - "literary" style; their natural role is that of passive victim. Though this juxtaposition occurs in different degrees throughout the cycle, the symbolic and heavily allegorised *Baptism* play and the concrete and exuberant *Talents* play seem to me to represent the obvious dramatic extremes between formal expository drama and comic energy in the plays of the collection.

Significantly, figures who occupy both kinds of drama do not develop but simply transfer. Noah's formal language and deference to God change to coarse insult and violence with his wife. Shepherds who earlier revealed themselves as fools suddenly recall Virgil's *Eclogues* and speak Latin (12/386-92). And figures who cannot make that transfer are comically coerced into an action they scarcely understand. Joseph, never happy in his role, is impelled grumbling into the *Flight into Egypt*. Mrs Noah is driven finally but reluctantly into the Ark, insisting that the coercion does not come from Noah. And what logic could ever send Cain off to carry out the tithing if it was not in the script? "Bot well I se go must I nede" (2/164) he says, unconvincingly and unconvinced.

By introducing their own kind of voice and action into the historical cycle, such figures produce tonal dislocations which

challenge the audience's response. Murder, universal destruction, infanticide, judicial prejudice and custodial brutality, the dread judgment of God Himself are deflected disconcertingly towards comedy. What accommodation do we make between the mindless violence of Cain towards his servant for his tricks and towards his brother for what Cain believes to be his trick? Why does the play open and close in a deflating mode of impudence and comic violence? Or what link is there between God's anger at sin and the domestic upheavals of the Noah family; between a sheep-stealer's farcical trick and God's great plan to deceive the devil? The diversity of drama across the collection is repeated within individual plays, raising on a smaller scale the same problems of thematic and dramatic coherence. The audience may well be disorientated by the abrupt changes in the kind of drama employed.

Mak is, of course, the emblem of Towneley - his challenge to the shepherds: "Why, who be ich?" (13/207) sums up our overall sense of paradox. He is the only figure who can see time past, present and future and reject them all for his own world of illusion. The curse of God on fallen Man, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" (Genesis iii 19) is remembered and rejected, with a cynical allusion to "The workman is worthy of his meat" (Matthew x 10).

I am worthy my mete,
ffor in a strate can I gett
More then thay that swynke and swette
All the long day. (13/310-13)

The very evils of which the shepherds complain at the start - oppressive retainers, oppressed husbands, abject poverty - are roles which Mak assumes successively in his attempts to conceal his true motives from them. "Wo is hym has many barnes, / And therto lytyll brede" (13/393-4) he hypocritically laments in preparation for the deceit. And, as for the prospect of future justice - "By the nakyd nek art thou lyke for to hyng" (13/308) - well, better not to dwell on that: "Let it neuer be spoken" (13/321). For such temporal realities, Mak substitutes illusion, and survives. The shepherds know his reputation, know he must be the thief but cannot penetrate the deception. Mak, acting the magician, invites them to look up his sleeve (13/396). And when he is finally discovered, Mak survives because the shepherds appreciate the trick. The realistic outcome, capital punishment, is substituted by a game-outcome - the tossing in the blanket. Mak has created a dramatic space for himself, in which his own values can prevail.

The development of morally unaligned actions of this kind is one of several ways in which Towneley seeks to elude the Augustinian structure of time and return its conflicting values and dramatic modes to the audience for assessment. For this is a play-collection which uses cyclic reference to contain rather than to control, and in so doing shows a confidence both in its dramatic medium, whose diversity it exploits boldly, and in its audience's response, which

it leaves frequently undirected. In this it contrasts with the plays at Chester, which seek more narrowly to define their purpose and genre, and to restrict the range of the audience's response. While Towneley directs its audience into its own memory and experience, Chester urges them rather to search the Scriptures and verify the truth. In that book-orientated post-Reformation cycle, remembrance is an act of scholarly retrieval and the confident experimental diversity of Towneley's drama has given place to Chester's nervously defensive and tonally consistent "Bible-cycle".

NOTES

- 1 Details from *The Towneley Cycle: A Facsimile of Huntington MS HM 1*, with an Introduction by A.C. Cawley and Martin Stevens, Leeds Texts and Monographs Medieval Drama Facsimiles 2 (Leeds, 1976) p.viii, Section E. On the probable content of the missing leaves, see Martin Stevens, "The Missing Parts of the Towneley Cycle", *Speculum* 45 (1970) pp.254-65.
- 2 *The English Mystery Plays* (London, 1972) p.310.
- 3 *The Towneley Plays*, re-edited by George England, with side-notes and introduction by Alfred W. Pollard, EETS ES 71 (London, 1897). All quotations are from this edition, cited by play and line number.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp.xxii-xxvi.
- 5 The Wakefield Master's work is edited and discussed by A.C. Cawley, *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* (Manchester, 1958). The drama of *The Baptism* is briefly discussed in my contribution to *The "Revels" History of Drama in English: Vol. I, Medieval Drama*, ed. Lois Potter (London, 1983) p.184.
- 6 The listing follows Woolf, *op.cit.*, p.310. On the *Jacob* play, see B. ten Brink, *History of English Literature*, trans. Alois Brandl (London, 1902) vol. 3, p.272, note to p.244.
- 7 Woolf, *op.cit.*, p.310.
- 8 Cawley and Stevens draw attention to the scribe's "effort throughout a long manuscript to improve his methods of presenting the plays" (*Facsimile*, p. xvi). The inclusion of plays out of sequence, also, suggests that the overall plan was not finally determined from the outset. But the manuscript has many features characteristic of a "presentation" copy.
- 9 L.D. Benson, *Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge [Mass.], 1976) p.8.
- 10 V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London, 1966) esp. chapters 4-5.
- 11 During the sixteenth century Chester's cycle was performed on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Whitsun week, but its final performance in 1575 was to be on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday after Midsummer Day; see R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents* (Chapel Hill, 1983) chapter 4, esp. pp.182-94. The St Ann's Day play, *The Killing of the Children*, is discussed in *"Revels" I*, pp.163-5. Contemplacio's opening speech to N-town Passion-Play II refers to the previous year's production in lines 9-20: see *Ludus Coventriae; or, the Plaie called Corpus Christi*, ed. K.S. Block, EETS ES 120 (London, 1922).
- 12 Quotation from *Chester*, ed. L.M. Clopper, *Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto, 1979) p.124.
- 13 The Decree of 11 August 1264 by Pope Urban IV, "Transiturus", instituting the Feast, draws particular attention to the remembering of a memorial: "Hec est commemoratio gloriosa, que fidelium animos replet gaudio salutari et cum infusione letitiae devotionis lacrimas subministrat. Exultamus nimirum nostram rememorando liberationem et recolendo passionem dominicam, per quam liberati sumus, vix lacrimis continemus. (This is the glorious

commemoration, that fills the souls of the faithful with joy at their salvation and brings them tears with a healing infusion of joyous devotion. Truly, we rejoice in the remembrance of our deliverance and in recalling the Passion of our Lord, through which we were set free, we may scarcely contain our tears.)" Text from Peter Browe, *Textus Antiquam De Festo Corporis Christi* (Aschendorff, 1934) p.28, my translation.

- 14 David Parry's text for the 1985 Toronto production of the plays for Poculi Ludique Societas undertook such a reconstitution, augmenting the deficiencies of the manuscript-text with material from the York cycle and, on occasion, with original composition drawing upon the Biblical narrative.
- 15 Translation from Vernon J. Bourke, *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Washington, 1953) p.350.