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### 'His langage is lorne': The Silent Centre of the York Cycle

The Christ of the York Cycle is a teacher and preacher of great power. Yet at the climax of the narrative, the long and gruelling trial sequence, Christ, the Logos, the Word stands alone before his accusers, virtually silent,<sup>1</sup> beaten and abused – a visual icon of suffering. Isaiah had prophesied, 'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep to his shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth' (*Isaiah* 53:7) The York playwrights have taken this text and exploited it to extraordinary effect. At the centre of the play the Word falls silent. In the four trial plays Christ speaks only thirty-five lines from a total of 1852 and yet he is the centre of the action, the figure around whom the demonic parody of the law swirls, central yet silent, what I have called elsewhere (using T.S. Eliot's metaphor for Incarnation), the 'still point of the turning world'.<sup>2</sup>

In the final confrontation between Christ and his judges in *Christ before Pilate 2: The Judgement*, Christ replies to Pilate's peremptory demand, 'Speke, and excuse þe if þou can' (l.299):

Euery man has a mouthe þat made is on molde  
In wele and in woo to welde at his will,  
If he gouerne it gudly like as God wolde  
For his spirituale speche hym thar not to spill.  
And what gome so gouerne it ill,  
Full vnhendly and ill sall he happe;  
Of ilk tale þou talkis vs vntill  
Þou accounte sall, þou can not escappe. (ll.300–7)<sup>3</sup>

These lines speak of the power of speech and the choice of each man to govern his tongue. Right speaking brings a right relationship with God; ill governed speech brings harm. Each of us must take responsibility for what we say. This speech is unique to the York Cycle. It is not in scripture, nor is it in any other

cycle, nor is it in the poetic analogues to the cycles – the *Cursor Mundi*, the *Northern Passion*, the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, or the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*. Yet with its concern for the sins of the tongue, it is grounded in the work of Willelmus Peraldus, a thirteenth-century French Dominican whose *Summa de vitiis* was one of the most influential didactic tracts categorizing the sins to come from the pastoral movement launched by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Particularly in his ‘appendix’ to his discussion of the sin of envy, Peraldus discusses twenty-four specific ‘peccata linguae’ ranging from blasphemy to false testimony to evil counsel.<sup>4</sup> This detailed discussion of the sins of the tongue was popularized in William of Wadington’s *Manuel des Pechez* and its English version, Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s *Handlyng Synne*. Edwin C. Craun has recently shown the importance of this section of the *Summa de vitiis* in the work of the *Pearl* poet, Chaucer, Gower, and Langland.<sup>5</sup> We have no evidence that the playwrights in York had access to any of these vernacular texts but we do know that two copies of the *Summa de vitiis* were in the library of the Augustinian Friary in York.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that the concerns of Peraldus were important to the playwrights from their emphasis on the centrality of the spoken word in this cycle. This particular speech highlights these concerns.

During the first two trials, the playwrights give Christ speeches based on the scriptures. Each of them turns on the issue of the sedition of his preaching. Each stresses the truth of what he has said and challenges the judges to prove his words false. The one non-scriptural speech in these plays, his address to Peter in *Christ before Annas and Caiaphas*, is carefully crafted to fit into the pattern the playwrights are building:

Petir, Petir, þus saide I are  
 When þou saide þou wolde abide with me  
 In wele and woo, in sorowe and care,  
 Whillis I schulde thries forsaken be. (ll.162–5)

Peter’s speech of bravado claiming he would never desert his master is here remembered. His words have not proven to be true. Even the faithful are guilty of ‘iacantia’ or boasting, one of Peraldus’ twenty-four ‘sins of the tongue’.<sup>7</sup>

Christ’s address to Pilate emphasizing the importance of speech brings the four trial plays into focus as the didactic centre of the cycle. His silence in these plays is an ironic inversion, contrasting his silence not only with the nervous bombastic speeches of his opponents but also with the portrayal of his character everywhere else in the cycle. By this speech he points to the

truth of what he has said in every other episode when, as he says to Annas and Caiaphas in the first trial:

I prechid wher pepull was moste present,  
And no poynte in priuité to olde ne zonge.  
And also in youre tempill I tolde myne entente; (ll.314–16)

Not only did he preach openly but the audience has seen him do it. Other cycles portray Christ as a worker of miracles<sup>8</sup> or as only the bleeding sacrifice for the sins of mankind<sup>9</sup> but in the York Cycle the character of Christ is first and foremost a teacher. Again and again he acts as his own expositor, explaining his actions and comforting his puzzled followers as he teaches them how to live a Christian life in a fallen world. Holy living, not holy dying, is the central theme of this cycle. The uniquely long sequence on the Ministry (which would have been even longer had the two delinquent guilds – the Vintners and the Ironmongers – turned in their plays to be copied<sup>10</sup>) shows Christ as a teacher and preacher providing himself as a 'mirroure for men', an 'ensample' for all Christians to follow. The speech against 'peccata lingue', delivered at the climax of the sequence, is one of the most powerful examples of the righteous life since it is reinforced by the compelling action in which it is imbedded. In the Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Woman Taken in Adultery, the Raising of Lazarus and the Entry Into Jerusalem Christ's ministry has been public. As he says to Pilate he spoke openly to the 'pepull'. This is in stark contrast to the claustrophobic huddles that are the trial plays, away from the public and confined to the households of the chief judges.

It is the outrageous accusation against Christ that he is committing the sins of the tongue that is at the heart of the entire trial sequence. It is directly engaged in the exchange between Christ and Caiaphas:

JESUS.           Ye myght haue tane me þat tyme for my tellyng  
                    Wele bettir þan bringe me with brondis vnbrente  
.....  
CAYPHAS.       For nothyng, losell? Þou lies!  
                    Thy wordis and werkis will haue a wrekyng.  
JESUS.           Sire, sen þou with wrong so me wreyes,  
                    Go spere thame that herde of my spekyng.     (ll.317–23)

Here Caiaphas accuses him directly of lying and from here on the claims that all he has done is to spread lies come thick and fast. At the end of this play Caiaphas

says to Annas, 'þis ladde with his leysyngis has oure lawes lorne' (l.387). In the next play, *Christ before Pilate 1*, as they work themselves up to present the case to Pilate, Annas says to Caiaphas that Christ 'ofte-tymes in oure tempill has teched vntrewly' (l.197). In the same sequence, Caiaphas claims that Christ has turned people from the faith 'thurgh talkyng of tales vntrewe' (l.209). Later as they present their case to Pilate, Christ's lying is associated by Annas with the repeated accusations of witchcraft 'thurgh his fantome and falshed and fendes-craft / He has wroght many wondir' (ll.298–9). Yet within this play the Beadle, who can be seen as the representative of the 'public' in this closed court, testifies to what he saw of the ministry and stoutly tells the court 'þe troupe I haue tolde' (l.357) to the fury of Annas and Caiaphas.

The plot of the York Cycle turns on the confrontation between the Old and the New Law. In this cycle it is Annas and Caiaphas who spearhead the animosity to Christ. The key to this animosity lies in Caiaphas' line cited above, 'þis ladde with his leysyngis has oure lawes lorne'. It is the issue of the law that the York playwrights choose to make pivotal in their dramatizing of the story. Elza Tiner<sup>11</sup> and Pamela King<sup>12</sup> have analysed the trial scenes with a view to explicating their sources in civil and ecclesiastical court proceedings. These analyses have been part of the advances that we have all made in our appreciation of the depth of social commentary presented in these plays. But there are deeper theological issues behind the incidentals of the trial details.

The issue is first raised as a major confrontation in that most deceptively simple play, *Christ and the Doctors*. Here, in the play that provides the bridge between the Nativity sequence and the Ministry of Christ, we have the last appearance of old Joseph and the young Mary but we also have the first appearance of the theologians in the temple – the guardians of the Old Law. The issue is clearly stated by the first Magister as they bustle in and take their seats:

Maistirs, takes to me intente,  
 And rede your resouns right on rawe,  
 And all þe pepull in þis present,  
 Euere-ilke man late see his sawe.  
 But witte I wolde, or we hens wente,  
 Be clargy clere if we couthe knawe  
 Yf any lede þat liffe has lente  
 Wolde aught allegge agaynste oure lawe

(ll.49–56)

But this is precisely what the child Christ does. The passage in *Luke 2* on which this incident is based gives no suggestion of what the child talked about with the

doctors. All the dramatizations of this episode follow Origen's interpretation in his sermon on this passage when he says, 'He was questioning the teachers of the Law, not, I say, that he may learn something from them, but that asking He may instruct them'.<sup>13</sup> For the Fathers this episode is where the Word supplants the Law and the power of the temple is broken.<sup>14</sup> The playwrights go to a much later confrontation between Christ and the Scribes and the Pharisees in *Matthew 22* for the substance of the debate. The *Matthew* passage is part of the build-up to the last weeks of the Ministry when again and again Matthew describes incidents where the theologians try to trap Christ, only to be confounded to silence. This conflation of the first incident in the Ministry of Christ with a much later one when the lines of antagonism have been clearly established in the Gospel account prepares the way for the source of the animus against Christ in the York Cycle. The two secular judges, Pilate and Herod, are portrayed as a vacillating second-rate politician and a buffoon. It is the untiring and implacable hatred of Caiaphas and to a lesser extent Annas that brings Christ to the cross in this cycle. The doctors in the temple are the forerunners of the murderous High Priests of the Passion sequence.

The issue of the law is a continuing thread in the Ministry plays. In the great vision in *The Transfiguration*, an episode unique to the York Cycle, Moses, the giver of the Law, is present to testify to the power of Christ over the Law. But the emotional trigger, the episode that brings the confrontation down to a personal level is *The Woman Taken in Adultery*. Here as the story in *John 8* makes very clear, the Scribes and the Pharisees set out to trap Christ. The lacuna in the manuscript in this play occurs just as the fourth 'Judeus' has had a bright idea, 'A new mater nowe moues me' (1.54). We know from scripture and the other treatments of the episode that the 'new mater' is to bring the woman before Christ and say, in the words of *John*: 'Master this woman was even now taken in adultery. Now Moses in the law commanded us to stone such a one. But what sayest thou? And this they said tempting him, that they might accuse him'. But Jesus will not be drawn. In the scriptures he simply doodles in the sand before presenting them with the unanswerable challenge, 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her'. In the lost sequence it seems apparent that the playwrights took the common interpretation from the *Glossa Ordinaria* that Christ wrote the sins of his tormentors in the sand.<sup>15</sup> When the text resumes, the four accusers are retreating in disarray. The next time we see the representatives of the Temple, Annas and Caiaphas are conspiring to judicial murder. Just as Judas is given the human motivation of greed for his act of betrayal, so the

playwrights build up the antagonism between Christ and the keepers of the Old Law, preparing the way for the immensely long trial sequence.

But can we really conflate the doctors in the Temple and in the woman taken in adultery with Annas and Caiaphas? I think we can and I think this conflation is reinforced by processional staging. In the N-Town Passion Play one actor plays one character throughout. As in a modern production, the audience comes to identify the actor with the character. We first see Christ entering Jerusalem in triumph and then suffer with him and mourn as his battered body is buried. But then when he rises refreshed and as we first saw him, we identify the actor as our familiar friend. This never happens in York. The same characters appear again and again but they are played by different actors. There are twenty adult Christs in the cycle and eight actors each playing Annas and Caiaphas. Identification of the characters is not made by recognizing the actors but by what the characters say. It is their words that identify them and so, because we have heard the doctors in the earlier plays using the same words with the same motivation as Annas and Caiaphas, the thematic and theological connection is made in the minds of the audience.

The audience can therefore accept Christ's claim in the early trial plays that he always confronted his opponents honestly because they have seen it happen. Like the Beadle who speaks for them, they know that Christ is speaking the truth. His truth claim is supported towards the end of *Christ before Pilate 1* when in reply to Pilate's demand to know if he is the Son of God he invokes the name of the Father insisting on his own innocence:

þou saiste so þiselue. I am sothly þe same  
 Here wonnyng in worlde to wirke al þi will.  
 My fadir is faithfull to felle all þi fame;  
 Withouten trespas or tene am I taken þe till. (ll.477–80)

Up to this point, although he has said little, Christ has stood firm countering the lies of the High Priests, enduring the beating of their servants, and appealing to Pilate's sense of justice. It is in the next play, *Christ before Herod*, that the playwrights boldly modulate the focus of the character of Christ by having him stand silent before his tormentors. The High Priests are cunning in their animosity; Pilate equivocates; Herod and his court merely jest. Moreover, what they demand is that Christ speak to entertain them and when he does not respond, Herod cries 'His langage is lorne' (l.190). The Word stands silent, abused in three languages, and when his abusers tire of the sport they dress him in the white garments of a madman and send him back to Pilate. It is in this

play, surrounded by the antics of Herod and his court, that Christ withdraws into himself, deliberately setting aside the power of speech and letting his enemies condemn themselves out of their own mouths.

Caiaphas is still obsessed with Christ's 'lesyngis' at the beginning of *The Remorse of Judas* but it is in the play *Christ Before Pilate 2* that the question of the abuse of language takes a new turn. In his opening statement, Pilate clearly states that he has taken it upon himself to be the guardian of the 'truth' and that anyone caught lying will be punished:

What traytoure his tong with tales has trapped,  
That fende for his flatteryng full foul sall be falland.  
What broll ouere-brathely is bralland  
Or vnsoftely will sege in þer sales,  
Þat caysteffe þus carpand and calland  
As a boy sall be broght vnto bales.  
Perfore  
Talkes not nor trete not of tales,  
For þat gome þat gyrnes or gales,  
I myself sall hym hurte full sore. (ll.15–24)

It is as if he has read Peraldus and is anxious to condemn, in particular, 'falsum testimonium',<sup>16</sup>

When the High Priests enter he demands 'That 3e will say the sothe' (l.39). But the truth is not told. Instead Caiaphas insists on the outrageousness of Christ's teaching only to be mocked by Pilate, who claims that for him their 'langage' is 'so large'. But Caiaphas presses his advantage insisting on a formal court procedure:

Oure langage is to large, but 3oure lordshipp releue vs.  
3itt we both beseke you late brynge hym to barre;  
What poyntes þat we putte forth latt your presence appreue vs –  
3e sall here how þis harlott heldes out of herre. (ll.132–5)

'heldes out of herre' is glossed as 'behaves in a disorderly fashion'. Christ is brought into the court and the stage action, based on the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, now exposes the lie. Christ stands still but the banners bow and the court bursts into confusion as first Pilate (l.184) and then Caiaphas (l.192) accuse the soldiers of lying about the banners when they claim that they cannot hold them upright. Dawn breaks and in answer to Caiaphas' demand Christ is formally called to the bar of justice. But once again the court is forced to

'behave in a disorderly fashion' as they rise involuntarily from their seats. It is here after the litany of lying, the false accusations, the mocking with words – a concatenation of the 'sins of the tongue' – that Christ speaks the uncanonical lines about truth telling. Pilate backs away from judgement to be met once again by Caiaphas' retelling of the one lie that he knows will bring the vacillating Pilate back into the fold:

Nought so ser, for wele 3e it wate,  
 To be kyng he claymeth, with croune,  
 And whoso stoutely will steppe to þat state  
 3e suld deme ser, to be dong doune  
 And dede. (ll.328–32)

Pilate is finally persuaded and in a burst of alliterative hysteria (ll.336–9) turns Christ over to be scourged by the sadistic soldiers. Then, as he stands once again the silent Word now merged with the bleeding Image of Pity, they hail him as king in a parodic inversion of all the litanies of praise that have rung through the New Testament sequence since the child was born. Once again it is the words that provide the link backwards in the memory of the audience. In the words of the tormentors, the audience is made to remember that this *is* the 'prince of pees' (*The Nativity*, l.57), the 'souereyne sege' (*The Nativity*, l.59) worshipped by Mary as she lays her baby in the manger. Her words were the truth; those of the tormentors are lies. In a world controlled by liars, the Word has deliberately fallen silent. Yet, paradoxically, it is through the sentence based on lies that the world will be redeemed. The playwrights have here emphasized how by corrupting the Old Law by the use of false testimony, the High Priests have defeated themselves. As Origen taught, the Word has supplanted the Law and the power of the temple is broken.

In a strange way, in this cycle, it is the sentencing of Christ that is the climax of the plot. What immediately follows is inevitable from that moment yet it moves away from the cotidian linear plot to the cosmic action of the divine plan. In the next two plays, the presentation of the character of Christ is again in transition. In *The Road to Calvary* and *The Crucifixion* he seems isolated in the enormity of what he is doing. In neither does he truly interact with the people around him. Although his only speech on the road to Calvary is addressed to the distraught women of his following, he addresses a time beyond the present pain and prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem. In *The Crucifixion*, as the efficient soldiers go about their grim business he speaks only twice – a prayer for the efficacy of the sacrifice (ll.49–60) and then, once the cross is



raised, the first of the calls for affective response that ends with the prayer for the forgiveness of the crucifiers (ll.253–64). It is in *The Death of Christ*, as he is dying, that the teacher and friend of the Ministry sequence re-emerges as he commends Mary to John's care and forgives the penitent thief. He dies speaking the last of the scriptural words from the cross and the nascent Christian community – a community excluded from the long, lonely trial sequence – in the persons of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus efficiently claim and bury the body in profound mourning.

What happens next is radically different from the treatment given these episodes in the Resurrection plays tied to the liturgical observances. These plays were divided between Good Friday and Easter afternoon or even Easter Monday, demanding the three days of ritual mourning.<sup>17</sup> Divorced from the liturgy, the Cycle plays can break the chains of mourning with a display of divine power in *The Harrowing of Hell*. The testimony – the 'truth telling' – of the patriarchs and prophets replacing the lies of the judges prepare the way as Christ, now in the role of *Christus Victor*, arrives at the gates of hell, breaks them open with the words of the *Psalm 24*, 'Attolite Portas', and proceeds to defeat Satan. But for all the call to arms on the part of the agitated devils, it is a battle of words that is waged and Satan is defeated and silenced. Just as the Temptation in the Wilderness had been a debate, so here the Word is triumphant as he claims the righteous souls for himself:

I make no maistries but for myne,  
Pame wolle I saue I tells þe nowe.  
Þou hadde no poure þame to pyne,  
But as my prisounes for þer prowē  
Here haue þei soiornd, nocht as thyne,  
But in thy warde – þou wote wele howe. (ll.217–22)

With the 'Laus tibi cum gloria' from the end of *The Harrowing of Hell* still ringing in their ears, the audience is confronted at the beginning of *The Resurrection* once again by a closed court and the anxious judges waiting for news. The testimony to the truth told by the centurion is not what they want to hear. They set the guard around the tomb. After Christ has risen (once again in silence), in a comic scene playing once more with the concept of the 'sins of the tongue', the soldiers try to work out consistent lies to preserve them from Pilate's wrath. But the first soldier, in the end, refuses to lie asserting:

...I schall hym saie ilke worde tille ende,  
Even as it was. (ll.345–6)

Ironically, although they do tell the truth to the judges, they are bribed once again to spread lies. This final appearance of Annas, Caiaphas, and Pilate re-emphasizes the central theme of the 'peccata linguae' that the playwrights exploit in this entire sequence.

In the last four plays in which the risen Christ appears, he is once again the teacher and preacher of the Ministry sequence building through the Resurrection appearances to the long and formal sermon in the Ascension play just before the cloud descends to take him up. The Word is no longer silent but actively preparing his disciples for the Descent of the Spirit at Pentecost and their mission in the world.

In their portrayal of the character of Christ, the York Cycle playwrights exploited the concept of Logos. In the plays of the Ministry and again in the post-Resurrection plays, he is indeed 'The Word on the Street' actively teaching and preaching the ways of holy living openly, colloquially, humanly. But at the centre of the sequence, in the hands of his enemies, he falls silent. God the Father includes in His attributes in the first play of creation 'veritas' – 'truth'. The playwrights understood Christ to be the Word and the Word to be Truth. The action of the trial plays is based on deceit and lies, reflecting Peraldus' exposition of the 'peccata linguae'. All the Word needs to do is stand silent, to be the 'still centre' and the redemption of the world is assured. Subtle, sophisticated, learned, and above all rooted in language, the portrait of Christ in the York Cycle is a unique creation.

## Notes

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- 1 For a full discussion of the Augustinian roots of this use of silence see Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The Word Made Flesh: Augustinian Elements in the York Cycle', *The Centre and its Compass: Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of John Leyerle*, Robert Taylor et al (eds) (Kalamazoo, 1993), 225–46.
- 2 Alexandra F. Johnston, 'At the Still Point of the Turning World: Augustinian Roots of Medieval Dramaturgy', *European Medieval Drama*, vol 1, Sydney Higgins (ed) (Camerino, 1998), 5–25.
- 3 All quotations are from Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (Cambridge, 1982).

- 4 Cited in E.J. Arnould, *Le Manuel des Péchés* (Paris, 1940), 197, and in Edwin D. Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 31 (Cambridge, 1997), 15–16.
- 5 Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity*, passim.
- 6 Shelf marks 599f and 602a. See K.W. Humpheys (ed), *The Friars' Library*, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues (London, 1993), 145, 146. For a full discussion of the relationship between the York Cycle, the pastoral movement, and the Augustinian friary, see Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The York Cycle and the Libraries of York', *The Church and Learning in Late Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of Barrie Dobson*, Caroline Barron and Jenny Stratford (eds), forthcoming 2000.
- 7 Cited in Craun, *Lies, Slander and Obscenity*, 14.
- 8 In the Chester Cycle, the Christ *acts* rather than *speaks*.
- 9 In the Towneley compilation with its few plays on the Ministry of Christ, the emphasis falls on the bleeding sacrifice, almost explicitly on the 'Image of Pity'.
- 10 For a discussion of the history of the manuscript as we have it, see Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (London, 1982), 1–45.
- 11 Elza Tiner, 'Inventio, Dispositio and Elocutio in the York Trial Plays', PhD dissertation (University of Toronto, 1987).
- 12 Pamela King, 'Contemporary Cultural Models for the Trial Plays in the York Cycle', *Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe*, Alan Hindley (ed) (Turnhout, 1999), 200–16.
- 13 Origen, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, M.F. Toal (ed), vol 1 (London, 1957), 245.
- 14 *Sermons*, 1, 235–53.
- 15 Attributed to Pope John VIII in *Bibliorum sacrorum*, vol 5, with *Glossa Ordinaria* and Commentary by Nicholas of Lyre (np, 1545).
- 16 Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity*, 15.
- 17 For a full discussion of Resurrection Plays associated with liturgical observances see Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The Emerging Pattern of the Easter Play in England', *Medieval English Theatre* 20 (1998), 3–23.