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**'Kick Ass and Take Names': Presenting the York Cycle's
Christ Before Pilate as a Meditation on Power and Authority**

With the possible exception of *The Last Judgement* pageant, few of the forty-seven plays in the York Cycle remain as theatrically relevant and potentially powerful in a modern performance context as *Christ before Pilate*. In addition to enacting an episode in Christ's Passion, the play explores a range of issues associated with power: in particular, the contrast between spiritual and temporal power and the problems associated with the exercise of power in the social and political arena. The conflict between social agency and moral obligation, and the themes of political compromise in conflict with personal conscience are as pertinent today as they likely were five hundred years ago. I chose to direct *Christ before Pilate* as an exploration of political power and authority, rather than to present the play as a 'museum piece' reconstruction of medieval theatre or a relic of medieval 'popular religion'. Although the religious content – even the devotional intent – of the York Cycle plays is undeniable, it is equally undeniable that *Christ before Pilate* is a play, not a liturgical office. My directorial approach to the Centre for Medieval Studies' pageant in the 1998 Toronto production of the York Cycle was less focused on developing an understanding for how the play may have been originally performed and more on how it might work as a piece of good theatre for a modern audience – and I believe that *Christ before Pilate* is intrinsically a very good theatrical work indeed.

My instincts and training both as a theatre professional and as a history student led me to believe approaching the play as a meditation on power and authority was both historically and artistically valid. The era when the York Cycle was regularly performed was remarkably charged, both socially and politically. In the intellectual environment of the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries the Bible was not viewed exclusively as a spiritual text but also as a historical text. Both history and religion were acknowledged as political and polemical idioms. We see many examples of late medieval writers who authorized their personal experiences through biblical analogy: perhaps the

best illustration of a medieval person who came to strongly identify contemporary events and experiences in her own life with the story of Christ's Passion may be found in Margary Kempe's account of her interrogations before the archbishop of York and the duke of Norfolk. From Wycliffe to Wat Tyler to Jack Cade, social comment and criticism in late medieval England often found its expression authorized by the well-known histories of the Bible, and we should expect to find such comment and criticism in the theatre of the time. York, a centre for both ecclesiastic and civil courts, witnessed many judicial proceedings which would have recalled to people of the day the story of Christ's ordeal at the hands of Pilate's soldiers. Presenting a play depicting Christ's trial in the same venue as these judicial proceedings must have suggested social and political issues of the day to a medieval audience. Having recognized the social and political circumstances under which the play had been originally produced, I saw my directorial approach not so much as giving the play a contemporary edge, but rather as honing the political edge which had been written into the play to begin with.

The original producers of the York Cycle were not concerned with presenting an historically accurate depiction of the biblical past: writers of this York pageant brought the story up-to-date by identifying Pilate as a 'duke', his followers as 'knyghts' or 'lordlyngis', and the High Priests Annas and Caiaphas as 'prelates'. Providing Pilate with his bailiff, Preco, was pure anachronism. Given their precedent, I saw no conceptual or artistic difficulty drawing design elements for our production from the entire Christian era. We presented our audience with Pilate crowned with golden laurels and dressed in Roman imperial purple, prelates arrayed as medieval law clerks, and Pilate's troop of soldiers decked out in uniforms whose liveries proclaimed a late-twentieth-century motto: 'Military Police: Kick Ass and Take Names'. And of course Pilate's audience – the public he addresses in the play – attended our performance dressed in ordinary street clothes, just as medieval audiences had done. Obviously anachronism was then and is now quite at home in the living theatre and does not detract from a satisfactory theatrical experience provided the issues discussed and the behaviours enacted in the play can be shared by both performer and auditor as vital, current, and immediate. The play's medieval author or authors approached the story of Christ's trial before Pilate in such a way as to tell the audience in no uncertain terms that yesterday is today and history is now. My directorial approach was an honest attempt to follow their lead.

I thought of the text of the play as a transcript of a trial, and set out to enlist our audience to attend Pilate's court. The action of the play broadly follows the form of a medieval judicial inquest:

- Pilate, confidently proclaiming the power of his office, delivers a call to order and is presented with a suit by Annas and Caiaphas; he formally agrees to hear their case.
- Christ is brought in. The self-evident nature of his spiritual power causes the imperial standards to bow of their own accord (an episode taken from the *Gospel of Nicodemus*). Spiritual power thereby is shown to triumph over earthly will: this conflict is presented as comedy.
- Prosecution. Pilate and the plaintiffs haggle over Christ's crime and punishment.
- Pilate calls upon Christ to offer a defence. Christ replies with a brief lesson on the ethics of power. Each person, he says, has the power to do good or evil; those who do good have nothing to fear but those who do evil will face a final reckoning before God.
- Pilate punishes Christ to the extent he deems proper: Christ is scourged for allegedly claiming to be a king – a political offence.
- The punishment having been executed, Pilate proposes to exercise mercy and release Christ.
- The plaintiffs remain unsatisfied: they demand death for the defendant.
- Pilate protests he has no cause to pronounce a death sentence on Christ, and Caiaphas and Annas deliver a direct, political appeal to the crowd. They call for Barabbas' release.
- Pilate's authority is threatened by a shout from the crowd: 'If you loose him, you're not Caesar's friend!'
- Pilate, sensing his authority has been subverted, washes his hands as a judge. In a political gesture, he gives the people what they want.
- Christ is bound and taken to his execution, with Caiaphas and Annas leading the way.
- Pilate, recognizing the injustice of his judgement, foresees evil will come from the proceedings.

My direction emphasized the inversion of the initial power structure within Pilate's court. Pilate's negative development from an all-powerful duke who can kill with looks to one powerless to protect an innocent man from his enemies was the major dramatic trajectory. The limits of temporal power in the face of humanity's unwillingness to do right – even when Right is set to stand before Power's face and say, 'Do Right now or pay later' – I saw as the major dramatic theme. This was my rough 'map' for directing the action of the play. I was

fortunate to have a very talented and dedicated cast who could navigate the terrain.

Staging *Christ before Pilate* with the pageant wagon was a challenge. The wagon on which we performed was extremely tall and access to the stage platform was restricted to a single staircase. The height and mass of the wagon made it a strong visual element, attracting and focusing audience attention; but by most practical standards it was an inadequate 'stage' – it was simply too small to hold a cast of a dozen adults engaged in presenting a play with as much action as *Christ before Pilate*. Like several of the other pageant directors at Toronto, I staged most of the action in front of the wagon, reserving the wagon for the performance of the formal judicial rituals of trial and judgement. Unlike many of the other pageants, however, much the action of our play occurred among – rather than before – the audience. My staging required Jesus, the soldiers, and bailiff to navigate through, interact with, and even at times directly confront audience members. The arguments of the trial itself – except for Christ's brief defence – were all presented from atop the wagon. From that restricted, distanced position occupied by Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas, our audience could see justice 'be seen to be done', while the majority of our players moved among the crowd, ordering them about and carrying out the cruel action of judicial torture literally in their midst.

Depicting the scourging of Christ was the most difficult staging issue in our play, primarily because the episode is deliberately drawn-out in the text; nearly a quarter of the dialogue takes place during this event. I can't help but imagine that the depiction of Christ as a victim of judicial torture must have been a source of very real tension for a medieval English audience. Given various judicial responses to warfare, domestic political intrigue, peasant rebellion, and Lollardy witnessed by the medieval citizens of York, the Cycle's medieval audience likely had ample opportunity to observe the workings of medieval judicial proceedings and the gruesome results of medieval justice: York's city walls were periodically festooned with bits of criminal anatomy. In light of these historical circumstances, the medieval audience watching this play must have been very discriminating indeed when it came to the depiction of brutality on stage.

My own approach to depicting this action was coloured by observations of modern responses to violence – particularly modern responses to its use by people in civil authority. I therefore chose to stage Christ's torture in such a way as to evoke images recalled from the videotaped beatings of Rodney King and Reginald Denny – images of real acts of brutality widely disseminated in the modern mass media – in order to sell the 'reality' of the theatrical

violence. Our audience in Toronto, many of whom doubtless were also members of the public who watched members of the LAPD work over Mr King with Tazers and night sticks on the nightly news, was treated to the sight of Pilate's 'schaply schalks' taking turns on Christ in a similar fashion. I have no idea if any of our audience recognized where I drew my inspiration for our staged violence, but judging from the expressions I observed on the faces of those audience members closest to the action, our depiction of Christ's torture was effective.

By the end of the day of our performance I had learned what aspects of my approach had worked in front of an audience and what had not. I am satisfied that much of what we set out to communicate was communicated. If the *Christ before Pilate* pageant teaches a lesson it is this: in time, all earthly power and authority – political associations, points of legality, even brute force – are vain in the face of what is right, true, and eternal. A play which can teach such a lesson six hundred years and half a world away from the place where it was first performed surely contains aspects of such rightness and truth, and must be as close to eternal as any work of human ingenuity can be.