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Staging the Passion:

the representation of the Passion scenes of the Chester and York mystery cycles in their contemporary context

by

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Abstract

The most effective preaching has application to the everyday lives of its audience, presenting the faith in a way that is pertinent to the audience's situation. In the late Middle Ages, the great cycle plays of Chester and York carried a strong didactic message by presenting the story of mankind from Creation to Doomsday with reference to the contemporary situations of their audiences. The Passion plays at the heart of the mystery cycles dramatised the story of the redemption of mankind in order to make its significance clear and relevant to fifteenth and sixteenth century audiences.

The purpose of this thesis is to study information about the staging of the plays and to examine some aspects of the contemporary surroundings of their audiences which would have been relevant to their reception of the plays. Through a study of the Passion plays of the Chester and York cycles in the perspective of their contemporary contexts, this thesis investigates ways in which the staging of these plays might have contributed to the presentation of the plays' didactic message. The aim of the thesis is to bring a fresh perspective to our current understanding of the presentation of the cycle dramas.

This study considers the way that three major preoccupations of the Late Middle Ages have been incorporated into the cycle dramas. A study of Christ's identity in the Holy Week plays presents the subject of kingship, often also incorporating the idea of service, particularly in the play of The Last
Super, while the plays of the trials of Jesus become the opportunity for a comparison between Christ's trials and contemporary law trials.

Following the first two chapters, the play of the Crucifixion provides the occasion for a discussion on the violence which was endemic to medieval society, in the context of the medieval cycle plays. All these themes are treated in the plays with reference to contemporary circumstances and events and popular iconography.
Acknowledgments

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Introduction

God Ėnuocion

Jesus

For knowe you nowe, the tyne is come
that sygnes and shadowes be all done.

Therfore, make haste, that we maye soone
all figures cleane rejecte.

(Chester 15/69-72)¹

He mystery plays of Chester and York were
civic plays, grounded in their cities and performed
by their citizens. As they recounts the history of
the world from its creation to its ending, the plays
presented a world that had structure and meaning, where even the
most cataclysmic events were seen to be part of the ultimate

¹ Quotations from the Chester Mystery Plays, citing play and line number, are taken
from this edition: R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, The Chester Mystery Cycle (London:
purpose of a watchful and loving God. As the centre and focus of this purpose, the Passion plays dramatised the message of the Redemption in order to make its significance clear to their audiences in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and relevant to their lives. It is the purpose of this thesis to set current knowledge about the staging of the plays against an examination of some aspects of the contemporary surroundings of their audiences which have relevance to the performances of the plays. The aim of the thesis is to add a fresh perspective to our modern understanding of the presentation of the plays' didactic message.

There are four great English cycle plays from the late Middle Ages which have survived to the present day in a relatively complete form, but only those of Chester and York can be incontrovertibly associated with a particular city. In York the performance of the plays is assumed to have been a feature of the city's calendar from at least 1376, when the earliest unequivocal reference to Corpus Christi pageants is found in the civic records, while, in the Chester records, a reference to the plays in 1421-2 indicates that by that time they were an established part of the

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8 Quotations from the Bible in this paper are taken from the Rheims-Douai edition. The Holy Bible translated from the Latin Vulgate. Published by the English College at Douay in 1609 & 1610 from the Old Testament and published by the English College at Rheims 1582 from the New Testament; the whole revised and diligently compared with the Latin Vulgate by Bishop Richard Challoner. (Project Gutenberg, 1582, 1609 [cited].


city's life. Throughout the town and guild records of both cities during the later Middle Ages, there are references which show that the performance of the dramas took place on a regular basis — up until 1569 in York, and 1575 in Chester. This means that, during a period of about 150 to 200 years, the plays were performed almost every year in the streets of their cities. While the shifting fortunes of individual guilds at times led to changes in their responsibility for various plays, there is no indication of any widespread disenchantment with the plays, and in fact, as Harold C. Gardiner has shown, the annual performance of the mystery plays was only discontinued after strong external pressure from government and central ecclesiastical agencies in the sixteenth century. The popular support for the mystery plays over such a long period indicates their importance in the civic and community life of their cities.

Records of both cities indicate that the staging of the plays was intended to fulfil a number of objectives. In the early Banns for the Chester plays, for example, the purpose of the plays is specified thus:

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6 The last clear references to an actual performance of the plays are found in Johnston and Rogerson, eds., REED: York, pp.355-358.
7 In this year the City Corporation decided to go ahead with the Whitsun plays against the wishes of the Archbishop of York, with the result that city officials were charged before the Privy Council and a civic performance of the entire play cycle was never attempted again. See Harold C. Gardiner, Mysteries' End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), pp.79-83.
8 Gardiner, Mysteries' End, pp.65-83.

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PAGE 3
The plays are therefore seen as important to the economic life of the community as well as its spiritual life. In both York and Chester, the production of the plays was a civic concern. Not only were they performed in the streets of the city, but the city authorities took an active interest in their organization. Agreements between guilds or the resolution of disputes regarding the joint production of plays were all overseen by the mayor and corporation. The city's guilds spent a large part of the year preparing for the pageant, with further time required after the performance days to sort out repairs to costumes and properties, and payment of overdue accounts. The plays' importance to their community is reflected by an emphasis on community and communal activities within the plays.

Many aspects of the production of the plays are common to both Chester and York. In both cities the plays were anchored in the life of the city and the community, owned and performed by

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9 Clopper, ed., *REED: Chester*, p.33. An entry in the A/Y Memorandum book of York in 1399 expresses similar sentiments regarding the performance of the plays in that city: 'please you to consider that the said pageants are maintained and supported by the commons and the craftsmen of the same city in honour and reverence of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the glory and benefit of the same city.' Johnston and Rogerson, eds., *REED: York*, p.11.

10 Comprehensive compilations of information relating to the dramatic life of these cities can be found in Johnston and Rogerson, eds., *REED: York* and Clopper, ed., *REED: Chester.*
the city's guilds and staged in the city's streets. In each city the guilds presented the plays to their audiences from pageant-wagons at a series of staging-posts reached in procession, a method most clearly described in the Breviary of the Chester antiquarian David Rogers:

The places where they weare played were in euery streete of the Cittie, that all people that would mighte behoulde the same: The manner of these playes was, euery Company made a Pageant on which they played theire partes, which Pagiant was a scaffolde, or a high four square buildinge, with .2. rownes a higher and alower, the lower hanged aboute richly and close, into which, none, but the actors came, on the higher they played theire partes beinge all open to the behoulders, this was sett on .4. wheeles, and soe drawne from streete to street, they first beganne at the Abbay gates, where when the first pagiante was played, it was wheled into an other streete, and the second pagiant came in the place thereof and so till all the pagiantes for the day weare ended.

(Rogers' Breviary, CRO: DCC 19)11

As the plays were performed throughout the streets of their cities, their major emphasis must necessarily have been the religious objective stipulated in the Banns. The appeal of Jesus from the cross in the York play of The Crucifixion, for example, is clearly designed to make effective use of these staging conditions to didactic purpose:

Introduction: God Devotion

Al men hat walkis by waye or strete,
Takes tente 3e schalle no trauayle tyne.
Byholdes myn heede, myn handis, and my feete,
And fully feele nowe, or 3e fyne,
Yf any mournyng may be meete,
Or myscheue mesured vnto myne.

(York 85/253-258) 13

When the plays presented the history of the world before the citizens who formed their audiences, their commission was not just to tell the story, but, as we have seen, to do so in such a way as to 'exhort the myndes of the comen peple to gud deuocion and holsom doctryne.' As Stanley J. Kahrl says, 'The plays came into being in the first place to educate the general populace in the articles of the faith.' This was achieved by presenting the Biblical story as relevant to the audience, portraying familiar scenes in ways that would not only explain their meaning but that could be understood in terms of the contemporary experience of the audience.

Although we have no eyewitness reports of the performance of these plays to ascertain how this was achieved, we know that even detractors of the plays like the Wycliffite author of A Tretise of Miracles Pleyinge admitted that the dramatization of the plays was vivid and memorable, and that the miracles of God could conceivably 'ben holden in mennes minde and oftere rehersid by


the pleyinge of hem than by the paintinge, for this is a deed bok, the tother a quick.'

The plays of the Passion are of central importance in the cycle dramas, since it is the Passion which holds the key to an understanding of the world-scheme presented in the plays. The overarching design of the cycles was to explain the history of the world and of mankind in terms of God's creation. Within that plan the didactic purpose of the Passion plays was to inform and educate the audience about the Crucifixion — the means whereby God restored fallen man to communion with him through the sacrificial death of Christ. By depicting the story of the Passion in terms of the late medieval culture in which they lived, the plays were designed to make their message relevant to their audience. Unfortunately there is a dearth of specific information about the performances of these plays, so the exact appearance of the dramas on the stage can never be accurately re-created. Nevertheless, by studying the contemporary situations in which the dramas were performed, it is possible to shed light on some aspects of the staging of the plays. This thesis examines the Passion plays of the Chester and York cycles in the perspective of their contemporary contexts in order to discover how the staging of these plays might have contributed to the plays' didactic message.

In Chapter One, this study first considers how the subject of Christ's identity, discussed in the plays of Holy Week, may reflect

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late medieval ideas of kingship. In the Middle Ages, both Chester and York went through shifting relationships with English kings as the fortunes and loyalties of both cities and kings fluctuated. The view of kingship considered in the plays is coloured by the experiences of these times. Running right through the York plays of the Passion, the theme of kingship and obeisance centres on the argument over whether Jesus is the rightful King of the Jews. Although he was hailed as a king in the Entry into Jerusalem, by the trial plays the assertion of his kingship had become the grounds for the charge of treason against him. The irony presented in the plays is that Christ really is the king, and is being executed because he speaks the Truth. To a greater or lesser extent the violence dealt out to Jesus in the three York plays dealing with the Crucifixion of Christ is all related to the identification of Christ as king. The two plays of the Chester cycle which begin the Passion seek to achieve a dual aim through an exploration of the identity of Christ. By establishing his divinity and power, the plays bring honour to God; and by emphasising his teaching and institution of the Eucharist, and his act of loving sacrifice in dying on the Cross, the plays aim to teach ‘holsom doctryne’ and also to move the audiences to renewed faith.\footnote{Quotations from the Bible throughout the text are from this edition: Rheims-Douai Bible, (Cited).}

Chapter Two is concerned with the plays which dramatise the trials of Jesus before Annas and Caiaphas, Pilate, and Herod, drawing on the various kinds of trial in operation during the later Middle Ages in order to make comparisons between corrupt and
ideal trials, between lies and the truth. The Crucifixion plays are considered in Chapter Three, examining the violence of the Crucifixion in the context of the medieval experience of violence and judicial punishment, together with the suffering inevitably resulting from that violence, and its implications for both the characters on the stage and the audiences.

In its promotion of the spiritual health of its audiences, the plays necessarily take into account doctrinal matters which were of current concern. Theological accounts of the Redemption in medieval thought originally followed the idea that by choosing to sin and thus disobey God, man had, as Richard Southern explains, 'voluntarily withdrawn himself from the service of God and committed himself to the service of the Devil'. As Timothy Fry saw it, 'since [man] was under the dominion of Satan, [...] the Redemption could be accomplished only by a person over whom Satan had no power.' Concentrating on the heroic image of Christ, earlier medieval depictions of the crucifixion from the tenth century onwards — as, for example, in The Dream of the Rood — portray Christ as so eager to engage in the crucifixion in order to achieve man's salvation that he appears to ascend the cross seemingly without outside agency. This view reflects the idea that the Redemption was the outcome of a cosmic struggle.

between God and the Devil, staged at the crucifixion, in which Man was a 'helpless spectator.' Debate circled around the question of whether the Devil had rights over man, and thus was entitled to demand recompense when Christ won mankind back to God. In the eleventh century the 'Devil's rights' doctrine was refuted by Anselm and subsequent theologians. As the theology of the Redemption was refined and redefined, the Devil was ousted from his pre-eminent place in Redemption theology, and, as Rosemary Woolf describes it, 'the stress then fell principally upon the restoration of man to God.' Although, as C. W. Marx has shown, in late medieval thought there was still ongoing debate on the place of the Devil in the Redemption, the trend in later interpretations of the Passion was to reverse the heroic emphasis and focus on the sufferings of Christ. One instance of the change in emphasis in late medieval English theology can be seen in the method of fixing Christ to the Cross. In much European art the cross is vertical and, as in _The Dream of the Rood_, Christ ascends to the cross without assistance, signifying his role as victorious king. In most English depictions of the Crucifixion during this period, on the other hand, the Cross lies flat on the ground for Christ to be nailed on to it, emphasising both his suffering and his status as sacrificial victim. This is the method used in the plays, echoing audience experience of popular iconography.

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19 Southern, _The Making of the Middle Ages_, p.224.
21 Marx, _The Devil's Rights_, p.2.
22 Marx, _The Devil's Rights_, p.21.
A study of the surroundings familiar to the audiences of the plays must also take into account the ready availability of illustrations of Biblical episodes in church art, such as wall paintings, painted glass windows and carved alabasters and roof bosses. Unfortunately, very few of these instances of church art survive today. Nevertheless, for those who wish to know how these church paintings looked, illustrated psalters and Bible picture books offer a guide, since, as critics have established, paintings on church walls were often copied from such books. From the fifteenth century, religious iconography was also produced in the form of popular Bible picture books and in printed woodcuts. Through these popular representations of late medieval religious art it is possible to gauge the kinds of pictures that had most significance to their audience. Critics have long discerned a relationship between medieval drama and

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85 Rickert, Painting in Britain, p.129. Rickert also draws attention to the treatise Pictor in Carmine, edited by M. R. James. This is a literary work compiled by an English Cistercian monk, containing the largest known collection of types and antitypes intended, as stated in the preface, for the guidance of painters, 'to supplement the faults of excessive levity by providing a supply of more excellent quality.' Pictor in Carmine, Archaologia, XCIV (1951), pp.141-166, cited in Rickert, Painting in Britain, p.155, and note 103 (p.156).
87 Lucien Febvre points out that block prints of religious pictures were produced and widely disseminated from the beginning of the fifteenth century, predating the printed book by about 70 years. Lucien Febvre, The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800 / edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton (London: N.L.B., 1976), pp.45-47.
iconography, and the familiarity of these pictures would have been an important factor in the reception of the plays. Not only would the drama have brought the familiar pictures to life, as 'quike bookis,' but also the memory of the performance could be kept alive in the mind of the spectator by recourse to these pictures, much like a theatre programme today. For the modern student of the plays, an appreciation of scenes from the Passion represented in these different media can act as a guide to the requirements of staging these scenes on the medieval stage. In medieval religious art, where the faithful rendition of the spiritual meaning of a picture takes precedence over its form, the importance of a figure dictates his relationship to the centre of the picture: where God and Christ are depicted, for example, they are at the centre of every painting. Pamela Sheingorn has argued that the same principle holds sway in medieval religious drama. For example, in the scene when Christ is buffeted and scorned in both cycle dramas, he is made to sit on a stool, with the result that he is not able to move about, and at the same time he must be centrally placed so that the Jews can circle round him to play their cruel game of 'Blind Man's Bluff' and to administer the buffeting.

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28 M. D. Anderson traces the debt owed to medieval drama by many wall paintings and alabasters. Anderson, *Drama and Imagery*. Clifford Davidson, on the other hand, believes that the dramatic effects of tableaux and stage pictures in the plays are derived from late medieval art. Clifford Davidson, *Drama and Art: An Introduction to the Use of Evidence from the Visual Arts for the Study of Early Drama, Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph series* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1977). Since the staging history of the mystery cycles lasted around 200 years, it is likely that both interpretations are correct.

Clues in the text together with supporting evidence from other contemporary sources can also be supplemented by the experience of modern productions which have sought to recreate the medieval playing conditions as closely as possible. Through their experience in testing the effectiveness of various hypotheses about medieval performances, we can gain a better perspective on the way the plays may have been staged. By drawing together information from all these sources, we can begin to appreciate some aspects in the staging of these plays that would have a particular significance for their medieval audiences, and to increase our understanding about the way the plays imparted their didactic message.
The Entry Into Jerusalem from The Holkham Bible Picture Book
Chapter 1

What man is that? questions of identity in the opening plays of the Passion sequence

JANITOR
What man is that ye maistir call
Swilke pruelege dare to hym clave?

PETRUS
Jesus of Jewes kyng and ay be schall,
Of Nazareth prophete he same,
Dis same is he,
Both God and man withouten blame,
Dis trist wele we.

(York 25/78-84)

ne of the primary purposes in staging the mystery plays was 'to exhort the myndes of the comen peple to gud deuocion and holsom doctrine.' At the core of this doctrine was the Crucifixion, the death of Christ upon the cross, an event whose full significance

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1 As stipulated in Chester’s Early Banns, Clopper, ed., REED: Chester, p.33.
could only be grasped through an understanding of the identity of Christ and the realisation that it was God himself who suffered death on behalf of mankind. The question of Christ's identity thus underpins the greater part of the mystery cycles, and nowhere more so than in the Passion plays.

This issue which the plays presented to their audiences was already familiar to them through its representation in contemporary art. The 'Betrayal' picture of The Holkham Bible Picture Book, for example, shows Jesus, with a calm face, inclining his head to receive Judas's kiss. He is about to be arrested and carried off to undergo the most severe trials and, ultimately, death, and yet, in the midst of a crowd of soldiers bearing an assortment of weapons, he looks more like a king accepting the homage of a subject than a prisoner about to stand trial. In fact, one of the soldiers in the picture looks back to his companion in puzzlement, as if to confirm that they have got the right person. Like this picture, the Passion plays of the York and Chester cycles show the people who come into contact with Christ grappling with the puzzle of his identity. Although the citizens of Jerusalem acclaim his arrival into the city with a royal welcome, not everyone in these plays agrees that Jesus is the king of the Jews: the high priests and officials, for instance, regard him as a troublemaker, and try to find a way to get rid of him. However, whether they honour him or criticise him, the question of Christ's identity preoccupies the attention and drives the actions of many different groups and individuals in these plays. His actions are interpreted
by each group in the light of their own perceptions of his identity.
The sick and the sinful who come to him for healing of body and
spirit ascribe his healing touch to divine power, while the
moneychangers in the temple regard him as an arrogant upstart
with pretensions to royalty. The issue of Christ’s identity which is
explored in these plays proves to be of primary importance in the
explanation of the Passion as a whole.

The question of Christ’s identity is particularly important in
the plays of Holy Week, covering the events from the preparation
of Christ to enter into Jerusalem and the subsequent formation of
the conspiracy against him until his arrest in the Garden of
Gethsemane, since it is during this time that the Passion is
initiated. This period is treated by the York plays of The Entry into
Jerusalem (York 25); The Conspiracy (York 26); The Last Supper
(York 27); and The Agony in the Garden and the Betrayal (York 28),
and the Chester plays of: The Corvisors Play: Christ in the House of
Simon the Leper (Chester 14) and The Bakers Playe: The Last
Supper, and Betrayal of Christ (Chester 15). Although these plays
cover roughly the same time-frame, the version of the Passion
presented in each cycle is characterised by its selection of episodes
and its treatment of the gospel narratives. Whereas Chester is
reasonably faithful to the sequence of events in the gospels of Luke
and John, York omits the cleansing of the temple, and instead
incorporates the episodes of the healing of the blind man and the

\[2\] Hassall, ed., The Holkham Bible Picture Book, fol.29.

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Chapter 1: What man is hat?

repentance of Zacchaeus. The approaches to the Biblical story in the two cycles reflect their emphasis on different facets of the nature of Christ.

Ideas about Jesus in the plays are fluid rather than fixed: the people of Jerusalem who welcome him to the city with shouts of 'Hosannah!' soon afterwards repudiate his actions in the temple, and later become the crowds who shout for his crucifixion. His friends take pleasure in serving him, but at times they too doubt him and rebuke him. As they accompany him in both public and private situations the followers and friends of Jesus come to a fuller understanding of his nature and purpose. The disciples of Chester struggle with doubts and ambivalence as Jesus teaches them who he is and what he has set out to do. In the York plays the disciples who assist in his entry into Jerusalem see Jesus as the king and themselves as beloved servants, but during the Last Supper and the evening in the Garden of Gethsemane they begin to realise the darker implications of this service. Crucial to the progression of the dramatic action in both plays is the way that Judas sees Christ, as his realisation of the wide disparity between his ideology and that of Jesus becomes the catalyst for his resolve to move away from Christ and enter into the conspiracy to plot his downfall. The development of his decision to betray Jesus carries a didactic message which is shown differently in each play. In Chester the gradual development of his disillusionment presents a point of view which the audience is implicitly warned to take note of and avoid, whereas in York, the first the audience knows of his

disenchantment with Jesus is his own revelation to them as he is about to enter the plot of the conspirators. Since he identifies himself as a cheat and thief, his point of view is presented as unattractive and alien, rather than one the audience is in danger of subscribing to. As critics have noted, the characterization of villains and tyrants is used by contrast to define the nature of Christ. Nevertheless, in both cycles it is the misconception of Christ’s nature revealed by his antagonists which initiates the drama of the Passion. By labelling Jesus as a troublemaker they spark off the actions which will eventually culminate in the crucifixion. The viewpoint of Christ’s antagonists is set alongside that of his friends and supporters to balance the contrasting perspectives of these groups against each other in their exploration of Christ’s identity.

Together with the assessment of the nature of Jesus on the part of various characters is Christ’s own awareness of his identity. As the crisis of his mission draws closer and he articulates more and more clearly the purpose of his undertaking, his self-perception is the benchmark against which the opinions of the others are measured. These points of view are explored in order to provide the audience with vivid and memorable instruction about the relevance of the Passion to human history.

The rationale underlying the Passion which is thus explained to the audience would have been reinforced visually through the staging of the drama. Since the plays which show

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Lawrence M. Clopper, "Tyrants and Villains: Characterization in the Passion"
Jesus entering Jerusalem were performed in the streets of York and Chester, these playing areas would become identified with the streets of Jerusalem. The plays were anchored into this medieval setting by reference to familiar customs, such as that in the York *Entry into Jerusalem*, where Philip and Peter are entitled to use the ass and her colt because 'the beestis are comen.' (York 25/57) As the distinction between Biblical Jerusalem and the contemporary city became blurred, Simon the Leper, Philip and Andrew and the other characters would become located in late medieval York or Chester alongside their audience. The shoemakers of Chester or the skinners of York who performed these plays would mingle with their audience beside the road, so it is both as first-century Jews and as medieval citizens that the crowds would hail Jesus as king and Lord.

In performance the acclamation of Christ as king as he enters Jerusalem is a reminder of one of the key features of late medieval kingship, the royal entry. This form of public ritual, designed to show the king to his subjects, is described by Sergio Bertelli as 'among the most important in the cult of the leader.' In this ceremony the monarch presented himself in a procession to the inhabitants of a city, while they in turn acknowledged him as

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7 The resemblance between the York *Entry into Jerusalem* and a royal entry ceremony was noted by Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p.52.

their king by means of staged pageants and public ovation. As Anthony Goodman points out, 'the display in public of the person of the king [...] and of the trappings of royalty played a key part in the creation of an impressive royal image.' The visible association of the king with the imagery of kingship was an important factor in reinforcing the king's power base and in generating public confidence in the stability of the kingdom. Both Chester and York, closely associated with royalty throughout the Middle Ages, record royal entries occurring during this time. The civic preoccupation with royalty is translated in the play cycles into a focus on the kingship of Christ which in the York plays is especially notable. For this reason it will be useful to look at the influence that medieval ideas of kingship, particularly as exemplified in the royal entry, might have on the presentation of Christ's identity in the plays.

A counterpoise to the exploration of kingship and divinity which must be considered in conjunction with these ideas is the notion of service, presented both as an aspect of the disciples' loyalty to Christ and as a model for the relationship between the king and his subjects.


10 The records show royal entries into York by Edward IV in 1478, Henry VII in 1486 and 1487, and Henry VIII in 1541. Johnston and Rogerson, eds., *REED: York*, pp. 120, 137-143, 271-277. Early histories of Chester record visits to the city by Edward I in 1285 and 1294, Richard II in 1397, Queen Margaret in 1455 and Henry VII in 1494. *A Concise History of the County and City of Chester, From the Most Authentic and Respectable Authors; Also the Life of St. Werburgh, Embellished with an Elegant Ground plan of the City and Suburbs of Chester, Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Chester: printed by J. Fletcher for J. Poole, 1791), pp. 109-112. Records of royal welcoming ceremonies include one for Prince Arthur in 1498, at which the play of the Assumption was performed, and a Triumph in honour of the Prince of Wales in 1610, and in the sixteenth-century, quasi-regal official welcomes in 1588 for the Earl of Leicester ('a great favorite of Queen Elizabeth') and in 1598 for the Earl of Essex ('as Genarall for Ireland' and 'a great favorite of Queen Elizabeth'). Clopper, ed., *REED: Chester*, pp. 139, 198-194.
attitude to Christ, and as an attribute of Christ’s own identity. This chapter will examine the staging of different perceptions of Christ’s identity and the contribution of these perceptions to the overall didactic message of the plays.

**York**

II BURGENSIS

Trewlye as for me I say
I rede we make vs redy bowne,
Hym to mete gudly his day
And hym ressayue with grete renowne
As worthy is.

(York 25/204–208)

When II Burgensis, in the York play of *The Entry into Jerusalem*, suggests to his fellows that they should greet Jesus ‘with grete rennowne’, he is continuing a tradition of ‘splendid civic shows’ to greet visiting royalty for which York was noted.\(^{11}\) Many of these royal entries and civic triumphs consciously mimic elements of Christ’s Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem;\(^{12}\) the programme for the royal entry of Henry VII into York in 1486, for instance, includes the instruction for ‘a certaine nowmbre of Childrine as shalbe gaddard togiddre aboute saint Iames Chappell calling Ioyfully king henrie after the maner of children.’\(^{13}\) While

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\(^{11}\) Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, p.52.


\(^{13}\) Johnston and Rogerson, eds., *REED: York*, p.139.
many civic triumphs used Christ's Entry into Jerusalem as a model for their procession, the York play of *The Entry into Jerusalem* turns this familiar association of ideas back on itself, to present Christ's arrival as a civic triumph. In a typical royal entry, the king's procession into the city would encounter a succession of pageants representing legendary heroes of the city, which would enact the king's relationship with the city. These displays, as Gordon Kipling explains, would 'not only define the path of the king's journey through the city, but also mark the signs of his unfolding manifestation.'

The York play follows this pattern of a royal entry: the arrival of Jesus is acclaimed by the citizens of Jerusalem as the coming of a king, and as he processes through the streets of Jerusalem, he meets with a series of events which are carefully selected to reveal different facets of his kingship, showing that he meets all the criteria expected in a medieval king. The kingship of Christ is a central preoccupation in the York plays, deriving from the city's long association with royalty. Therefore, in order to understand how Christ's kingship would have been perceived by medieval audiences, we need to look at medieval ideas about kingship, and specifically the central significance of kingship to the city and people of late medieval York.

Throughout the performance life of the York Corpus Christi plays, the often complex relations between the city of York

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14 Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, p. 57.
15 Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, p. 53.
16 Kipling, *Enter the King*, p.141.
and its monarchs can be traced through the records of royal entries put on by the city. A comparison of the city’s reception of two monarchs in the later fifteenth century can give an idea of how York approached the celebration of a royal entry. As the largest city in the north, with the opportunity during the Wars of the Roses to welcome both Yorkist and Lancastrian kings, York maintained an official stance of impartiality during the civil wars, but within the records of civic receptions for royalty there are indications that popular sympathies of the time lay with the Yorkist faction. In 1478 Edward IV visited York; in order to persuade him to come, emissaries had been sent to petition the ‘kynges gude grace’ to visit the city. The A/Y Memorandum Book for 1478 which records his visit refers to him as: ‘the most illustrious, most awesome, as all report, and yet most Christian Edward, by the grace of god, king of England and France and lord of Ireland.’ Gifts were ‘quite lavishly’ given to ‘the said most awesome lord king.’

In contrast with this fulsome praise, the account of the visit of the Lancastrian victor, Henry VII, to York eight years later, refers simply to ‘the king.’ Perhaps to compensate for this attitude of reserve, or perhaps to erase the memory of their previous allegiance, the city fathers felt the need to remove any uncertainty about the city’s loyalty to the Tudor king by ordaining

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17 Alexandra Johnston and Margaret Rogerson contend that the city ‘refused to take sides’ during the Wars of the Roses. Johnston and Rogerson, eds., REED: York, x.
a welcoming show 'wherby his highnesse may the rather be movid to think that the said maier Aldermen Sheriffes and other inhabitances heyr be gladdid and loiful of the same his commyng as thei haue be in tymes past of seing commyng of other kinges yer souerain lord'. As a result the elaborate royal entry which was devised to welcome Henry VII far surpassed that accorded to Edward IV:

first Wher the two sherifffes of the saide Citie for the tyme being with xx horses haith be accustumed to yeue yer attendance of kinges herbefor resorting vnto the Citie at Tadcastre brige being thextremitie of yer faunches It is now concludid that not oonly the saide two sherifffes bot aswell two of the Aldermen accompanied with xl horses shall yer wait on his grace

Further instructions decreed that, whereas previously the mayor and aldermen, all dressed in their scarlet robes, were accustomed to await the royal party about two miles outside the city, on this occasion the welcoming committee, now expanded to include the common council and clerks in violet, chamberlains in maroon and many of the city's inhabitants in red, was stationed ready to meet the king as far as five miles from the city.

The York play of *The Entry into Jerusalem* features a welcoming committee like the one discussed above in the burgesses who decide 'Go we hym meet as oure owne kyng, / And kyng hym call' (*York* 25/172-3). Since this particular play in the

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22 Johnston and Rogerson, eds., *REED: York*, p.139.
cycle was presented by the skinners, makers of furred garments, whose speciality was civic ceremonial costumes, the opportunity to advertise their trade guaranteed that the attire of their civic welcoming committee would look as sumptuous as in a real civic triumph. However, it is important to note that in the play, as in a royal entry ceremony, the glitter of the welcome is not for appearance alone, but carries a clear message: the degree of opulence in the welcoming show is a measure of the honour which the city considers is due to the king.

In the Entry of Henry VII into York, a pageant of Solomon was presented, confirming Henry’s right to rule as the successor to the six Henrys who had preceded him:

Most prudent prince of pruved previsioun
Their primordial princes of this principalitie
Haith preparate your reame the viijth by succession
Remitting reame als right to your Rialtie
Their ar kings condigne of your consanguinitie
Ffull riall and rightwose in rewle of yer regence
And ful lordly thei execute the lawes of yer legence

Evidence of a valid claim to the kingship was particularly important in the fifteenth-century, when new dynasties which had come to power by force of arms sought to consolidate their power base by establishing their legal right to rule. For this reason, confirmation of the legality of the king’s rule was a key element in a royal entry.

24 Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, p.60.
Chapter 1: What man is jat?

In the play, the citizens recount Christ's genealogy as he approaches the city, thereby showing him to be the rightful king by law and by inheritance:

Of Jœuda come owre kyng so gent
Of Jesse, Dœuid, Salamon;
Also by his modir kynne take rente,
Pe genolagye beres witnesse on.
This is right playne.
(York 25/239-243)

Other kingly qualities are ascribed to Christ by the burgesses as evidence of his kingship, and their application to Christ is then confirmed through their dramatic presentation in episodes occurring during the procession. Even without the other similarities, it is clear that the most effective method for staging the Entry into Jerusalem is to perform it like a royal entry. According to this scenario, Jesus would ride his ass on the street through the crowds, but as each separate episode begins, he would dismount and go up onto the waggon for the performance of the scene, before re-mounting the ass preparatory to riding on to the next episode.

The first quality which the Burgesses cite is the power of healing:

He helys þe seke, both ȝonge and olde,
And þe blynde giffis þam þer sight.
Both dome and deffe, as hymselffe wolde,
He cures þame right.
(York 25/130-138)
The gift of healing, regarded as first and foremost an aspect of divine power, was appropriated by medieval kings as a sign of their divine right to rule. According to Marc Bloch, 'the conception of sacred royalty imbued with the miraculous runs all through the Middle Ages.' In medieval England and France, kings were attributed with miraculous powers of healing, particularly of the tubercular condition known as scrofula, or 'the king's evil,' and English kings from Henry II onwards would 'touch for scrofula,' as the contemporary expression put it. The twelfth-century historian, William of Malmesbury, writes that people claimed that this power proceeded, 'not from personal sanctity, but from hereditary virtue in the royal blood.' It was thus seen as an indicator of true kingship, and in the later Middle Ages was used as such by the various factions of the Wars of the Roses.

In the Gospels, Christ's miraculous healing powers are, of course, intrinsic to his ministry, as manifestations of the omnipotence and mercy of God. In the York play however, these powers are particularly associated with the kingship of Christ when blind Cecus, calling out for healing, cries out to 'Pe kyng of

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27 Information about the royal touch for scrofula is derived from Bloch, *Royal Touch*, p.3 & passim.
29 The Lancastrian supporter Sir John Fortescue, writing in the mid-fifteenth century, denied that Edward IV possessed this gift, which he ascribed solely to Henry IV. Bloch says that 'each side sought to discredit the rite as practised by the other party.' Bloch, *Royal Touch*, p.85.
blisse' (York 25/336). By choosing to take the episodes of the healing of the blind man and the cripple from other parts of the Gospel narrative and inserting them into the events of the Entry into Jerusalem, the dramatist is clearly using these incidents to emphasise the sacred kingship of Christ. The healing of the blind man is a particularly apt choice since, as Marc Bloch points out, in many documents of the time there is 'a confusion [...] between scrofula and various other affections of the face or even the eyes.'

It seems likely that the disease was understood as a generic affliction where the blind and the lame could also present themselves for healing. A sixteenth-century painting entitled *A French king receives Communion in both kinds and prepares himself for touching the scrofula* is a good example of this perception: the sufferers are depicted with a range of symptoms and supporting themselves on crutches. In the play, as Cpecus kneels to receive his healing he offers 'worshippe and honnore' to the 'kyng of blisse' (York 25/351,353) in a manner reminiscent of an oath of fealty.

The rich symbolism which is an integral part of a royal entry is employed in the healing episode. The royal power of healing applied to individuals is also symptomatic of the king's power to heal the ills of the nation. As Christ reaches his

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30 The healing of Cecus, the blind man, is clearly taken from the Gospel accounts of the healing of Bartimaeus, which took place on the road outside Jericho. See Mk 10:46-52. The healing of Claudus the lame man has no direct source in the Gospels, but has resemblances to the healing of the paralytic (Mt 9:1-7) and the healing of the sick man by the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9).

31 Bloch, *Royal Touch*, p.11.

destination, this royal attribute is reiterated by the burgesses within their long series of acclamations:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Hayll saluer of oure sores sere} \\
&\text{[...]} \\
&\text{Hayll boote of all oure bittir balis} \\
&(\text{York 25/506, 511})
\end{align*}
\]

One of the most popular and enduring aspects of medieval kingship was its association with the imagery of wealth and prosperity. From Richard I, whose first action on arriving in England as king was to weigh the royal treasure,\textsuperscript{33} to the splendid court festivities of the Yorkist and early Tudor kings,\textsuperscript{34} magnificence and wealth was commonly regarded as a fitting attribute of royal majesty.\textsuperscript{35} When Henry VII visited York, one eyewitness recounts that he was 'Richely besene in A gowne of cloth of golde furred with Ermyn,' and riding on 'his Courser.'\textsuperscript{36} Nothing would appear to be in greater contrast to this pomp and show than the sight of Jesus, dressed simply and and riding on an ass, and yet, in performance, the inevitable effect of this contrast is to emphasise the majesty of Christ, providing a visual reminder of his statement in the Gospels: 'My kingdom is not of this vvorld.'\textsuperscript{37} As the gorgeously-apparelled burgesses make obeisance to him,
Chapter 1: What man is sat?

earthly splendour becomes subservient to the greater rule of heaven epitomised in Christ.

The idea of riches becomes associated with Christ through the staging of carefully chosen incidents. In the Yorkist and early Tudor monarchies the imagery of royal wealth was sustained not only in 'elaborate public rituals,' but also, as Anthony Goodman has shown, in demonstrations of generosity such as the daily charitable distributions made by the royal almonry. The burgesses in the play recount the miracle of the loaves and fishes in terms of such generosity:

3a, v. thousands men with loves lyue
He fedde, and ilkone hadde inowe.
(York 25/134-135)

A vivid association between Christ and the wealth imagery of royalty is made when Zaché, offering fealty on his knees, is inspired to give away his money (York 25/449). Treasure is clearly linked with Christ in the burgesses' final outpouring of praise:

Hayll welle of welthe may make vs mede
[...] Hayll dyamaunde with drewry dight
Hayll jasper gentill of Jury.
(York 25/505, 517-518)

In the final joyous stage of the procession into Jerusalem the citizens enumerate Christ's many kingly qualities in their

welcoming greetings, giving a picture of wholehearted celebration in his arrival which is found in many contemporary pictorial representations. In a text of the *Biblia Pauperum*, for instance, where the illustration shows smiling onlookers strewing flowers and garments in the path of Christ — even the ass he rides on appears to be smiling — the picture celebrates victory and authority. These qualities are typified in the play in the person of Jesus the king.

In a royal entry, as Bertelli points out, 'all were “actors”: participants, not spectators.' In the same way, the citizens of *The Entry into Jerusalem* are not simply watchers and commentators, but recognise the necessity of a response on their own part:

> With all he service hat can be done,
> The kyng of blisse loued mote he be
> (York 25/352).

It is this attitude of service which characterises the disciples' response to Jesus. At the beginning of *The Entry into Jerusalem*, their idea of his identity appears to be clear and unproblematic — he is the king, and they are devoted to fulfilling his commands:

> Lord he to ples we are full bayne
> Boke nyght and day to do þi will.
> (York 25/43-44)

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Chapter 1: What man is he?

Every command from Jesus meets with a similar pledge of service as the disciples derive their own identity from him as his faithful attendants. They rejoice in being able to announce him as the king of the Jews (York 25/80-4), and in their own position as his servants. That this service carries with it benefits of elevated status and power is evident both when the Janitor asks their advice about telling the citizens (York 25/92-96) and when they feel entitled to intercede with Jesus on behalf of the blind man (York 25/337-341). While there is no hint of self-interest on the part of the disciples in the text, in performance it would become clear that honour inevitably accrues to them as the attendants of the king. As they process behind Christ into the city while the crowd shouts its acclamation, the faces of the crowd are turned towards them and the cries of the crowd are shouted in their direction, giving them a palpable share in Christ’s glory.

However, in the play of The Last Supper this certainty is shaken, as the disciples meet with a challenge to their ideas about Christ’s identity and their own role in his mission. Although the play begins with the disciples acting out their service, preparing the meal and fetching water (27/5-6, 41-42), suddenly the roles shift, and the service they have appropriated to themselves is taken over by Christ, as he begins to wash the disciples’ feet. Their initial refusal to accept this change in roles is articulated by Peter:

I schall neuere make my membres mete
Of my souerayne service to see.

(York 27/49-50)
Chapter 1: What man is he?

In the picture of this scene in the Holkham Bible Picture Book, Peter raises his hand in protest while he places his foot in the basin.\(^{41}\) This ambivalent response to the reversal of roles is represented in the plays by the contrast between the lesson of meekness expounded by Christ, and the disciples' inability to understand it. In fact, no sooner has Christ washed their feet in the lesson of humility, than they begin to debate which of them should take precedence (York 27/73-75). However, the predominance of the didactic message of humility in this scene would be reinforced by the strong visual images presented in performance. Firstly, when Christ washes the disciples' feet, he is the only one kneeling, in an attitude of submission before the twelve seated disciples (York 27/63-4). Then as he places the little child among them 'for insaumpills seere' (York 27/86), he would give them a visible example of not only meekness, but of weakness and powerlessness as the infant stands in the midst of the group of grown men. The plays operate at tension, presenting the disciples' view of Christ while at the same time showing the flaws in this perception. The preponderance of visual images of humility in The Last Supper is in contrast with the disciples' expressed view of their role, as armed retainers. Andrew offers swords (York 27/176-177), while Peter swears never to forsake his sovereign (York 28/135). These early plays of the Passion show the beginning of the slow and difficult process of change in the disciples' idea of Jesus, from one based on contemporary ideas of kingship to that of Saviour and Redeemer.

\(^{41}\) Hassall, ed., The Holkham Bible Picture Book, fol.28.
In the role of Judas the York plays offer the audience a further perspective on the identity of Christ by personifying the negative attributes of which Christ is the positive. Whereas Jesus openly enters Jerusalem to public acclamation, Judas first appears to the audience as a furtive figure on the edge of the stage in the play of *The Conspiracy*, while Pilate and the high priests are formulating their scheme to do away with Jesus. As the archetypal evil villain, Judas regales the audience with a spurious justification for the revenge he is plotting, his speech a travesty of Christ’s prophecy of retribution to Jerusalem, which was addressed to the audience in the previous play:

*Ingenti pro inuria — hym Jesus, þat Jewe,*

*Vnjust vnto me, Judas, I juge to be lathe.*

(York 26/127-128)

In opposition to the generosity and wealth which is associated with Jesus, Judas is miserly and greedy. The generous action of the woman who pours oil on Jesus makes him ‘woundir wrothe’ (York 26/134), not only because it thwarts his scheme to milk the common purse, but because he can’t see the point of it:

*Þat same oynement, I saide, might same haue bene solde*

*For siluer penys in a sowme thre hundereth, and fyne*

*Haue ben departid to poure men as playne pité wolde.*

(York 26/141-143)

Where the citizens see the kingly quality of generosity in Christ, Judas sees only profligacy. The fact that he stole a tenth of the group funds, seemingly carefully measured, is a twisted application of the law of tithing — he is taking a tithe from the one
Chapter 1: What man is hat?

he should be paying it to. Even though at first he seems prepared to haggle over the price of Jesus, offering the priests the opportunity to 'bargaye or by' (York 26/218), he regards the tenth as his right and fixes on the price of 'thirti pens and plete, no more pan.' (York 26/229). Judas's obsession with money, which is familiar through many pictorial representations of the thirty pieces of silver changing hands, becomes the occasion for a piece of comic by-play, for although the other conspirators have told him 'Judas, we trewly pe trast' (York 26/252), he has to remind them to give him the money: '3itt hadde I noght a peny to purvey for my prowe' (York 26/272).

By preferring to sell Jesus to 'the princes of prestes' (26/150), it appears that Judas has rejected the idea of Jesus as king, and prefers to place his allegiance with the priests. However, by identifying Judas's plan as 'som tresoune' (York 26/160), the Janitor reminds the audience that Jesus is king, while Judas is identified as 'a traytoure'(York 26/264). Unlike Jesus, who is a 'talker trystefull of trew tales' (York 25/513), Judas is treacherous, assuring his master that 'all my loue and my likyng is holy vpon 3ou layde' (York 28/251), just as he is about to betray him. Judas turns homage on its head by making the kiss into a betrayal.

The contrast between Jesus and Judas is visible in their appearance. Anthony Goodman writes that in the late Middle Ages, the 'features and physique of the king were regarded as having particular importance since it was believed that physical
attributes reflected spiritual qualities or defects. Jesus is hailed as 'kyng comely' (York 25/500) while Judas is categorised as 'bittilbrowed' and 'uncomely to kys' (York 26/169, 200). To the medieval audience therefore, Judas's malice is identifiable in his face: he is the opponent and antithesis of true kingship.

The antagonists of Jesus are Pilate and the priests and officials who see Jesus as a threat to their own position. Coming straight after the end of The Entry into Jerusalem, where the citizens have just hailed Christ as their king, the contrast between Pilate's entrance and that of Christ is particularly noticeable. Whereas Christ is heralded by a royal entry, Pilate is attended only by the priests, as he prepares to enter into conspiracy with them; whereas Christ is acclaimed king by the city and the populace, Pilate has to make his own acclamation. His long, ranting speech of self-introduction at the beginning of The Conspiracy, proclaiming himself 'he ryallest roye', 'regent of rewle' and a 'perelous prince' (York 26/1, 2, 16), sets his rule in opposition to Christ's kingship. The high priests place the kingship of Christ against that of Pilate when Caiaphas tells Pilate that '3ou for oure souerayne semely we seke' (York 26/30) while Annas calls Jesus 'a rank swayne whos rule is no3t right' (York 26/33). However, where Christ was hailed for bringing healing, Pilate threatens death or injury to anyone who does not bow to him:

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Chapter 1: What man is hat?

'sone his liffe shall he lose, or left be for lame' (York 26/21). Where the welcome to Christ was a spontaneous outpouring of praise, the honour accorded to Pilate is dictated by him: 'The dubbyng of my dingnité may not be done downe.' (York 26/7).

Caiaphas concurs with the praise to Pilate, promising: 'Sen 3e bere of bewté þe bell, /Bythely schall we bowe as 3e bidde' (York 26/195-196). The contrast with Christ is evident in action as well as speech. A ranting speech like Pilate's demands activity — Pilate would be striding up and down, brandishing a sword, whereas Christ's speeches indicate that every move he makes is deliberate and gestures are only used where necessary.

According to the antagonists, Jesus is the antithesis of kingship, and their accusations contradict the kingly attributes that he was praised for in the previous play. In place of his identification with prosperity as a 'welle of welthe' (York 25/505), the priests identify him as a threat to wealth, because he overturned the 'tabillis full of tresoure' (York 26/72). Where the burgesses celebrated the new law instituted by Jesus (York 25/143-147), the high priests see only the destruction of the old law (York 26/96). Christ's holiness is seen as sacrilege rather than sacredness, because the antagonists do not believe his claim that he is God's son (York 26/86).

The soldiers swear allegiance to Caiaphas, but the play makes it clear that their homage is to the wrong ruler. When they are attempting to arrest Jesus, they are so blinded by the light emanating from Christ as they lay hands on him, that they fall
over (York 28/258-269). This wonderfully visual piece of staging is both anti-miracle, recalling — and in opposition to — the gift of sight to the blind man and the raising up of the cripple in The Entry into Jerusalem (York 28/258), and a commentary on the incapacitating spiritual blindness of the antagonists. In the Biblia Pauperum the commentary for the picture of this scene says 'darkness pervades', and the types given for this incident are the foolish virgins without their lamps, and Lucifer being banished from Heaven into the darkness of the pit.\textsuperscript{43} The soldiers' spiritual blindness is so severe that even when Jesus performs a miracle in their midst by healing Malcus's ear after Peter has cut it off, their attitude does not change: they carry on tying him up as if nothing has happened. In staging this miracle it is likely that in order to provide the best visibility possible, Malcus would be on his knees in front of Jesus, as he is in medieval pictures of this scene.* Consequently, his increased hardness of heart, as he curses Jesus after being healed by him (York 28/291-293), is in ironic contrast to the attitude of homage he has inadvertently adopted.

In explaining his mission at the beginning of The Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus indicates of his own view of his identity:

\begin{quote}
From heuen to erth whan I dyssende
Rawnsom to make I made promys,
The prophicie nowe drawes to ende,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43} Henry, ed., Biblia Pauperum, sig. v.
\textsuperscript{44} see Henry, ed., Biblia Pauperum, sig. a.
Chapter 1: What man is 

My fadir wille forsoth it is
Pat sente me hedyr.
(York 25/8-12).

He is coming into Jerusalem as its lord, in fulfilment of the prophecy, but at the same time he is subject to a higher authority as the obedient son of God. His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the back of an ass illustrates the dual nature of his identity.

While the emphasis in a royal entry was usually on the affirmation of the king as true and rightful ruler, in some royal entries the king was depicted as a vengeful judge. In 1392 the royal entry to celebrate the resolution of a serious dispute between Richard II and the city of London initially presented the king in this role. As the triumph proceeded, dramatising the repentance of the Londoners and their reconciliation with their king, his role gradually became more merciful. The image of the king as wielder of justice is drawn on in the York play as Christ weeps over Jerusalem and predicts the judgment which is to come upon the city:

I murne, I sigh, I wepe also
Jerusalem on þe to loke,
And so may þou rewe
Þat euere þou þy kyng forsuke
And was vntrue.
For stone on stone scathill none be lefte
But doune to þe grounde all schal be caste,
Thy game, þi gle, al fro þe rete
And all fro synne þat þou done hast.
þou arte vnkynde:

45 Kipling, *Enter the King*, p.227.
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Since his lament over Jerusalem would be spoken directly to the audience, the final line, addressed both to the citizens of Jerusalem and to the audience of York, is clearly applicable to both the Biblical city of the play, and the real city where they stand.

The image of Jesus as judge, which he presents in his lament over Jerusalem, melds into the image of Jesus as lawmaker which is presented in the play of *The Last Supper*, as he replaces the law of the Passover with a new law:

> But he lambe of Pase þat here is spende,
> Whilke Jewes vses grete and small
> Euere forward nowe I itt defende
> Fro Cristis folke what so befall.
> In þat stede schall be sette
> A newe lawe vs bytwene.

(York 27/29-34)

In the clearest statement about himself he has yet given them, he presents the paradox of his identity which the plays have set up:

> 3oure lorde and maistir se me call
> And so I am, all welthe to welde.

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Chapter 1: What man is falt?

Here haue I knelid vnto 3ou all
To washe youre feete as 3e haue feled.
(York 27/61-64)

By developing the action from the kingship of Christ as presented in the Entry into Jerusalem to his submission, enacted first for the disciples in the foot-washing, and then offered to the father in the Garden, the plays have sought to present the paradox of king and servant, both commanding and submissive, which is the argument of the Gospels.

The play of The Agony in the Garden emphasises Jesus's obedience to God, as he kneels in prayer, and this attitude of humility is further underlined when the angel ministers to him as he kneels there. Whereas in the lament over Jerusalem, Christ speaks directly to the audience, his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is spoken privately to God. To emphasise the difference, in performance it is likely that Christ would kneel side-on to the audience, as he does in many contemporary illustrations of this scene, rather than facing the audience directly. In this way the audience can see that the prayer is private, but at the same time they can also hear what Jesus is saying. This is a key moment in the plays as Jesus stresses his relationship with God, repeatedly addressing him as 'fadir.' At the same time his words remind the audience of his special identity as God's son:

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But if thou soothly hast this sone sille
Withouten surffette of synne bus sakles be slayen,
Be it worthy wroght even at thyne awne will,
For fadir, att this bidding am I buxum and bayne.
(York 28/92-95)

This attitude of private communication reinforces for the audience the unique relationship between Jesus and God, while Christ's stillness during the extended prayers provides an iconic image of humility and obedience for the audience to imprint on their minds and take away with them.

In the 'Betrayal' picture of The Holkham Bible Picture Book, Jesus stands in the midst of a crowd of soldiers bearing an assortment of weapons, as with a calm face, he inclines his head to receive Judas's kiss. He looks more like a king accepting the homage of a subject than a prisoner about to stand trial. Christ's sacrificial obedience is manifested both in his words, including his prayers, and in action — as Judas initiates the Betrayal, Jesus not only concurs in it, but also shows Judas where to place his kiss:

Full hartely Judas, Haue it euen here,
For with his kissing is mans sone betrayed.
(York 28/252-253).

Although the earlier acclamation has announced him as the rightful king by fulfillment of prophecy (York 25/28), Jesus makes it clear that his reign emphasises different facets of kingship from those normally celebrated. He has the power to act like a vengeful

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**Hassall, ed., The Holkham Bible Picture Book, fol.29.**
king, drawing on the whole armoury of heavenly resources to annihilate his opposition:

For witte þou wele, and my willis were,  
I myght haue pour grete plenté  
Of aungellis full many to mustir my myght  
(York 28/280-282)

However, he chooses not to do so. Instead he is a merciful king; in healing Malcus’s ear he has pity on his enemy:

Þou man þat is þus derede and doufully dyght,  
Come hedir to me sauely and I schalle þe sayne.  
In þe name of my fadir þat in heuene is most vpon hight,  
Of thy hurtis be þou hole in hyde and in hane,  
Thurgh vertewe þi vaynes be at vayle.  
(York 28/286-290)

Most importantly, he shows that acts of service are an integral part of kingship, and that all his acts of kingship are sponsored and supported by God. What the plays demonstrate to their audiences is that Jesus is the pattern of both kingship and service — the ideal and ultimate king.

**Chester**

my Fathers will almightye  
I must fullfill meekelye  
and ever to be bowne.  
(Chester 15/86-88)

Although in the Chester cycle both the supporters and the antagonists of Christ identify him as a king, the theme of kingship
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receives less emphasis here than in the York plays. The York cycle concentrates mainly on the kingly qualities of Christ, whereas Chester also gives attention to his divine power and his relationship to God the Father. The identity of Christ is first explored in Play 14 through the perceptions of the other characters, as at various times they identify him as a prophet, as a king and as the son of God; these shifting designations are a sign of the struggle they experience in attempting to define who Christ is. In Play 15 he reveals his identity to his disciples and his antagonists through both his words and his actions. The exploration of Christ's identity is used in the Chester cycle to teach the audience not only about the nature of Christ, but also the implications of his identity.

The Passion sequence of the Chester cycle opens slightly earlier in the Bible narrative than it does in the York play, beginning with the visit of Christ and his disciples to the house of Simon the Leper before the Entry into Jerusalem. In the opening sequence of Chester 14, the Corvisors Playe, also known as Christ at the House of Simon the Leper, Christ's friends and disciples appear secure in their view of his identity. They acknowledge that he is 'full of grace' (14/17) and worthy of devoted service (14/9-10), but they most often allude to him as a worker of miracles. Characteristic of their view is the greeting of Lazarus welcoming Christ to Simon's house:

Welcome, lord, sweete Jesu.
Blessed be the tyme that I thee knewe.
From death to life through thy vertue
thou rysed me not yore.
While they are ready to honour him, the provisional nature of this esteem is demonstrated by Simon’s dismay at the emotional outpouring of Maria Magdalena’s repentance, challenging his own view of Christ and leading him to express doubts about Jesus to Judas:

A, Judas, why doth Jesus soe?
Methinke that hee should lett her goe,
this woman full of synne and woe,
for feare of worldes shame.
And if hee verey prophet were,
hee should knowe hir life here
and suffer her not to come him nere
for payringle of his fame.

(Chester 14/57-64)

In contrast Maria Magdalena takes a more holistic view of Christ as the cure for all the ills of body, soul and spirit:

Welcome, my lovely lord of leale;
welcome, my harte; welcome, my heale;
welcome, all my worldes weale,
my boote and all my blys.

(Chester 14/41-44)

The difference between the two points of view would be evident in the staging of the scene. Contemporary illustrations of this episode such as that in the mid-fifteenth century Biblia Pauperum show Christ and Simon seated at a table together with
the disciples, while Mary Magdalene crawls under the table with the box of unguent to anoint Christ’s feet; in the stage directions of the Corvisers Playe a similar configuration is indicated:

Tunc Jesus sedebat, et omnes cum eo, et veniet Maria Magdalena cum alabastro unguenti, et lamentando dicat.

(Chester 14/40 s.d.)

The Chester pageant carts, according to Richard Hosley’s estimate, measured perhaps ten to fourteen feet across, and in this scene may have been required to hold as many as seventeen people. The limitations of accommodating such a large cast in a small acting space dictate that in order to approach Jesus, seated amidst his disciples, so as to anoint his feet, Maria Magdalena must move in front of the seated group of men and kneel before him. This would have the effect – literally – of foregrounding her anointing of Jesus, whilst ensuring that she does not obscure the audience’s view of him.

Meanwhile, because Simon’s conversation with Judas is obviously intended to be confidential, it must be conducted on the periphery of the group. As the two disciples turn towards each other to confer privately, they would demonstrate in visual terms their ideological separation from Jesus and the disciples. Maria

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51 Jesus, Simon the Leper, Lazarus, Martha, Maria Magdalena and the twelve disciples.
Magdalena's view of Jesus is endorsed in the play by the verbal approval she receives from Jesus and this would be visually reinforced in performance by her central position at his feet. As the only kneeling figure she is a model of penitence which would be favourably contrasted with the dismayed self-righteousness of Simon and Judas, and at the same time her actions foreshadow the footwashing in the play of the Last Supper. A further affirmation of Maria Magdalena's perception of Jesus is given by the exorcism of the seven devils which, as the text shows, takes place at the same instant that she receives Christ's forgiveness:

Seaven devills nowe, as I well see,
    thou hast dryven nowe owt of mee,
(Chester 14/133-134)

Existing texts for this scene do not give stage directions to indicate how the exorcism may have been performed, so we do not know whether the original productions showed the seven devils emerging from Mary's body, to be visible to the disciples and the audience alike, or whether, like Banquo's ghost, they were visible only to the one possessed. Recent research has confirmed the popularity of spectacular dramatic effects in medieval drama, especially where devils are involved, and so, given what Meg

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55 Lumiansky and Mills, Chester, p.256 & Appendices.
Twycross has called 'the medieval love of pyrotechnics,' it seems likely that the exorcism of the seven devils was staged as a dazzling confirmation of Christ's power to effect release from sin, with fireworks to mark the exit of each demon.

In the Gospels the anointing of Jesus by Mary Magdalen is taken to prefigure the anointing of Christ's body for burial, but the Corvisors Playe gives this incident a different significance. As she anoints him, Chester's Maria Magdalena addresses Jesus as 'my comfort and my kinge' (Chester 14/129), and thereby makes a connection between the anointing of Jesus and the anointing of a king. A study of sacred rituals of power in the Middle Ages by Sergio Bertelli makes the point that on many occasions the anointing and coronation of a king was followed immediately by a royal entrance into the capital. By scheduling the episode of Christ's anointing immediately before the Entry into Jerusalem, the play reinforces this correlation, and Christ's entry into Jerusalem becomes associated with a Royal Entry.

However, the links with a royal entry suggested by this scene convey an association of Christ with kingship which is at the same time less prominent and more complex in Chester than it is in the York plays. Whereas in York the citizens of Jerusalem enumerate Christ's kingly qualities, in Chester they emphasise his

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57 Bertelli, The King's Body, p. 57.
58 In this arrangement the play follows John's Gospel, Christ is anointed in John 12:2-11 and enters Jerusalem in John 12:12-19. In the Synoptic Gospels Christ's entry into Jerusalem precedes his anointing.
divine power and his relationship to God. He is ‘the prophet Jesue’ (Chester 14/170), ‘verye Goddes Sonne’ (Chester 14/174), and ‘commen from God in majestie’ (Chester 14/182). They recall his miracles (Chester 14/185-188), and understand that these signify a direct relationship with God:

SEXTUS CIVIS
  These miracles preeven appertly
  that from the Father almightie
  hee is commen, mankynd to bye;
  yt may not other bee.

(Chester 14/197-200)

However, Christ's relationship of obedience and submission to God the Father has a peculiar resonance with the relationship of medieval Chester to its kings. Ever since the Earldom of Chester became a royal title in the thirteenth century and one of the customary titles of the Prince of Wales after 1301, the city of Chester considered that it had an exceptional relationship with the monarchy, particularly with the eldest son of the king. Accordingly, as the records show, among the most notable royal welcomes staged in Chester during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period were those performed for the eldest sons of the king. One such occasion was the visit of Prince Arthur to Chester in 1498, when the ceremonies featured the play of the Assumption performed ‘at the abbey gates and at the heigh crosse; while the

gifts given by the prince included a present to the smith Thomas Edyar, of 'a Crowned of Silver guilt, A Hammer with horseshoe and Pincers the Armes of Smiths to them and their Successors for ever.' The idea of a close reciprocal relationship between the king's son and the city is one which the plays draw on in their depiction of Christ's relationship with God the Father and with the city of Jerusalem/Chester.

Given the limitations of space on the pageant waggon it seems most likely, as David Mills has suggested, that in the Entry into Jerusalem the action would have taken place at street level in order to accommodate the procession. The bystanders, made up both of audience and of craft members playing 'citizens of Jerusalem,' would be kneeling, as we know from Annas's subsequent complaint that 'All the world, as you might see / Honoured him upon there knee' (Chester 14/358-359). In such a configuration Christ, seated on the ass as he rides through the rejoicing crowds, would be at a height comfortable enough to be seen and heard easily without being distanced from the crowd. When he abruptly halts the ass in the midst of the cheering crowds and begins to lament over Jerusalem, the startling transition from celebration to solemnity would be a bleak reminder to the audience that the nature of God incorporates a dreaded judge as well as a

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62 Clopper, ed., REED: Chester, pp. 22-23. Also, in 1610, a Triumph was presented on the occasion of the visit to Chester of Henry, Prince of Wales. Clopper, ed., REED: Chester, p.258.


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Welcome king. With the close involvement of the audience as part of the welcoming crowd, the sudden change from a prefiguration of Christ’s second coming into the New Jerusalem to one of Christ coming in judgment would have a significant dramatic impact.

The Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem in the Corvisors Playe echoes a rare kind of medieval civic triumph in which the king comes as a ‘wrathful and fearful adventus.’ Chester’s Christ comes as a law-enforcing king, whose cleansing of the temple removes long-standing abuses (Chester 225-258). Because of this, the idea of kingship has negative connotations for the merchants — they take Christ’s cleansing of the temple as the act of a usurper or pretender, cry down his supposed claim to royalty, and challenge him to provide proof of his right to evict them:

Saye, Jesus, with thy janglinge,
what evidence or tokeninge
shewest thow of thy rayninge
that thou darest doe this?

(Chester 14/233-248).

Chester’s interpretation of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, where hesitation and suspicion are evident rather than universal jubilation, taps into an alternative viewpoint which was not uncommon at this time. Similar readings of the scene are found in contemporary art in Europe as well as in England. For example, the early fifteenth-century painting by fra Angelico in the Museo di San Marco shows no exuberance of welcome. The bystanders watching Jesus are thoughtful, even sombre, while two of their

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Kipling, Enter the King, p.227.
number have their backs turned to Jesus and are more interested in their private conversation. Even the man laying his cloak down in front of Jesus is paying more attention to getting the folds lying exactly right than to Jesus. A similar illustration of 'The Triumphal Entry' in the Holkham Bible Picture Book, depicts the onlookers as agitated rather than jubilant, while Zacchaeus in his tree seems particularly glum. By showing the juxtaposition of celebration with judgment, and of celebration with antagonism, these pictures illustrate the ambivalence towards Jesus which is evident among the citizens of the Chester play.

The antagonists of the Chester plays present two viewpoints about Jesus's identity. As custodians and 'lookers of the lawe' (Chester 14/305), their justification for plotting to get rid of him is that he is a threat to their law, and his growing popular support could bring the Romans in force (Chester 14/311-312). Their argument is that unless they act quickly, their own law will be lost:

Heale he any, lesse or more,
all men will leeve on his lore.
Therefore yet is good to slea him before,
yf that wee will be slye.

(Chester 14/370-377)

By showing these guardians of the law furtively scheming to do away with Jesus illegally, and compounding their crime by plotting to have Lazarus killed – since as a key witness to Christ's

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66 Fra-Angelico, "The Entrance in Jerusalem (from the Silver Armoury)," (Museo di San Marco, early 15th century).
resurrecting power he would undermine their charges against Jesus (Chester 14/337-344) – the play ironically highlights the difference between earthly law and heavenly law. In their evident contempt for the very law they claim to defend, the antagonists underline its inadequacy, and in contrast the law of Jesus is affirmed as the law to live by.

The play refutes the view of the antagonists firstly by showing them to be corrupt, and secondly by showing them to be spiritually blind. Since they are patently the villains of the piece, it is accepted that their idea of Jesus is in error, and, by extension, that the inversion of their viewpoint is the truth. As a result, the antagonists inadvertently make a strong case for the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, when Annas says derisively:

all the world, as you might see,
honored him upon there knee
as God had comon that daye.
(Chester 14/358-360)

Their identification of Jesus is shown to be faulty when they confess that they cannot recognise him:

Yee binne brethren on a rowe.
Which is he I cannot knowe.
(Chester 14/409-410)

The post-Reformation Banns for the Chester plays stipulate that the actors playing the Godhead should wear ‘face-gilt’ in order to make it obvious that they were not seeking to pass

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themselves off as God but only to represent him (Banns, 197-203). Comparable to the halo which identifies Christ in medieval art, the gilded face, which is either a separate golden mask or gold paint applied to the face, serves to identify the Godhead on stage even when he is not speaking. The spiritual blindness of Christ's antagonists is revealed by their inability discern his true identity in spite of this clear identification. Not only are they unable to recognise him, they remain deliberately blind; instead of seeing Jesus as the Son of God, they associate him with the Devil, and suggest that he might expect help from 'Belzebubb and Sathanas.' (Chester 15/363)

The motive behind the questioning and suspicion of the moneychangers - the actual or perceived threat of monetary loss - is also the motive behind Judas's criticism of Christ, and that which drives him to betrayal. Like the moneychangers, Judas makes a verbal association between Jesus and kingship, with his oath 'By deare God in majestie / I am as wroth as I may be.' (Chester 14/265-256). These two groups of critics are linked to each other by their financial disappointment and by their negative perspective on the kingship of Christ. Instead of bringing wealth and distributing largesse, they see him as bringing impoverishment by his wasteful acceptance of Maria Magdalena's gift of expensive oil, and by overturning the money tables, and so according to their standards he does not fulfill the criteria for a rightful king.

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68Clopper, ed, REED: Chester, p.247.
As in the York plays, Judas is the negative image of Christ. Where Christ preaches forgiveness of debts (Chester 14/77-88), Judas boasts of misappropriating the money given to Jesus (Chester 14/281-284). As well as being financially greedy, he is a glutton. In the play of the Last Supper, the stage directions twice emphasise that Judas has his hands in the communal dish (Chester 15/104 s.d.; 120 s.d.), highlighting the importance of the contrast between Jesus and Judas to the dramatic action. Where Judas is constantly taking food from the common dish, Jesus freely gives his body and blood as food for the benefit of all:

This bread I give here my blessinge.
Takes, eate, brethren, at my byddinge,
for, leevy you well, wythout leasinge,
this is my bodye
that shall dye for all mankynde
in remission of there synne.
(Chester 15/89-94)

When Judas comes to betray Jesus, the kiss he offers is an echo and at the same time a distortion of the kisses offered by Maria Magdalena. Where her kisses are inspired by penitence and love, his are driven by revenge and anger. The staging of this scene makes it clear that Judas’s kiss is worthless: it is not necessary to identify Jesus, since Jesus has already identified himself to the soldiers:

JESUS
You men I ake, who seeke yee?

MALCHUS
Jesus of Nasareth, him seeke we.
JESUS
Here, all ready — I am hee,
What have you for to saye?

(Chester rs/sos-so8)

However, in spite of this, Judas still seeks to kiss Jesus. Judas's identification of Jesus, revealed to be faulty and redundant, symbolically represents his failure to identify Jesus as the Son of God:

A, sweete maister, kysse thou mee,
For yt is longe syrh I thee see,
And togethers we will fée.
And steale from them awaye.

(Chester rs/sos-312)

The dramatisation of the kiss of betrayal illustrates one of the key points of difference between the York play and the Chester play. In York, Jesus accepts Judas's kiss 'full hartely' (York 28/252), an interpretation which stresses not only Jesus's humility as he embraces his fate, but his constant love for all people, even when they sin against him. The corresponding scene in Chester shows Jesus suffering the hypocritical kiss, without acknowledging Judas in any way. This alternative interpretation echoes the depiction of this incident in a fourteenth-century wall painting in Chalgrove, Oxfordshire, which shows Judas putting his arms around Jesus and pulling his master towards him, in order to kiss him, while Jesus stares into the distance. In Chester's 'Betrayal'

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scene Jesus is arrested by his own divine will, and Judas is already damned: 'bodye and soule hee is forlorn' (Chester 15/126).

Where the Corvisors Playe had mainly shown other people's ideas about Jesus's identity, during the play of The Last Supper Jesus speaks explicitly about his identity and purpose, making it clear that he is pursuing his mission on earth in obedience to God the Father:

my Fathers will allmightye  
I must fullfill meekelye  
and ever to be bowne.

(Chester 15/86-88)

Kathleen Ashley's work on divine power in the Chester cycle has highlighted the fact that the theme of God's omnipotence is a central concern in this cycle.70 Christ's task is to make known God's divine power to mankind and he does this by showing that every action he takes relates back to the Father. In the Corvisors Playe his straightforward demonstration of power in single-handedly driving the moneychangers from the temple is carried out in order to cleanse 'my Fathers wonnynges' (Chester 14/227), while at the Last Supper he tells the disciples that everything he does is to glorify 'my Father in majesty' (Chester 15/237).

Nevertheless, although Jesus is obedient to the Father, at the same time he is also powerful in his own right, as he declares to the moneychangers:

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This temple here I maye destroye,
and through my might and my maistrye
in dayes three hit edifie
and buyld yt up agayne.

(Chester 14/253-256)

As he prepares to institute the Eucharist in the Bakers Playe he makes it clear that he is doing this on his own authority as a law-giver:

For noww a newe lawe I will beginne
To helpe mankynd owt of his sinne
Soe that hee may heaven wynne
The which for synne he lost.
And here in presence of you all,
Another sacrifice beginne I shall,
To bringe mankynd out of his thrall,
For helpe him neade I muste.

(Chester 15/73-80)

However, when he inaugurates the ritual, although he blesses the bread himself (Chester 15/89), by his action in giving thanks to the Father for the chalice he shows that the Eucharist is a sacrament which pertains to both the Father and the Son:

Tunc accipit calicem in manibus, oculis elevatis, dicens:
Father of heaven, I thanke thee

(Chester 15/96s.d.; 97)

While the authority of Jesus is verified by his founding of the new law, paradoxically, it is after establishing himself as a figure of power that Christ begins to perform a service for his followers, to give them a lesson in humility. Although he identifies himself as 'lord and maister' (Chester 15/162), he immediately demonstrates a unique understanding of this identity by washing
the disciples' feet, thereby making a radical connection between lordship and service. Since, in the Bible, the foot-washing and the institution of the Eucharist do not appear in the same Gospels, the playwright was able to exercise his own judgment about the order in which he would use these incidents. By choosing to place the institution of the Eucharist before the washing of the disciple's feet, the author of the Chester play extends the memorial aspect of the Eucharist to include the foot-washing. Whereas in the York play of the Last Supper the disciples do not understand the lesson they are being given, in the Chester play their understanding is shown by a literal interpretation of Jesus's instructions to his disciples in John 13:14: 'If then I have washed your feet, Lord and Master, you also ought to wash one another's feet.' The importance of this lesson is underlined by the extraordinarily drawn-out scene, where first Jesus washes the disciples' feet, and then they all wash each other's feet (Chester 15/168 s.d.). This sequence where everybody washes each other's feet, found only in the Chester text, is an important indicator of the play's distinctive emphasis on the sacramental nature of self-denial in the service of others. Although unique to the Chester play, the scene was incorporated very effectively into the 1983 Toronto production of the N-Town Passion. In this production the disciples silently and solemnly washed each other's feet, with the stateliness and elegiac quality of ritual. Remarkably, the audience appeared to catch the mood and peripheral restlessness was minimal. With this example

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72 Poculi Ludique, The Toronto Passion Plays 1 and 2 from the N-town Cycle (Toronto: Information Commons University of Toronto, 1983), 2 videocassettes (60 min. each).
before us, it is easy to believe that the Chester scene could have been played in the same fashion, so as to emphasise the sacred and memorial aspect of the ritual as part of the Eucharist, given to remind the disciples of Jesus 'aye after evermore' (Chester 15/96). This scene is an exceptionally static one, since following on from the foot-washing Jesus addresses his disciples at length. However, the strength of the sacred elements remind us that the line between medieval religion and medieval drama was often very blurred indeed. As Peter W. Travis comments: 'The Corpus Christi play — like the Mass, the feast, and the procession — was a type of sacred action performed in order to evoke, express, and sustain the community's faith in the ultimate meaning of Christ's presence in their lives.'

The Chester plays explore the contrast between Christ's divinity as the Son of God, with the inherent power that pertains to this position, and his submission and obedience to God, with the surrender of power that this implies. Through his divinity, Jesus has access to unlimited power with which to achieve miracles, and yet, by his dedication to fulfilling his father's will, he sets an example of service, both to his followers on the stage, and to the audience of the plays.

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Conclusion

In the cycle plays of Chester and York, an understanding of the identity of Christ is crucial to an appreciation of the didactic message which the plays seek to impart. As Lawrence Clopper has argued, 'Each playwright had to struggle with defining the central mystery of Christ.' By presenting the different perceptions of various characters who attempt to define the identity of Christ, each group of plays promotes an individual understanding of his nature. In the Chester plays the ire of Christ's antagonists is balanced against Peter's definitive realisation:

Lord, of wayle thou arte the wall
(Chester 15/158)

In the York plays the kingly qualities of Christ are enumerated against the backdrop of Judas's anti-kingliness. Through the staging of a range of ideas about Jesus expressed by various characters in the plays, his true identity is made clear to the audience.

Underlying the indisputably didactic message of each play are different subtexts. The exploration of Christ's kingship in York follows through in the trials and the crucifixion into discussions by both friends and enemies of his royalty and kingship. In Chester, the emphasis is on showing Christ's relationship to the Father, and ultimately, by striking the balance between Christ's obedience to

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74 Clopper, "Tyrants and Villains," p.16.
the Father and his own inherent power, by showing Christ as
divine, and the way to the Father:

Sickerlye, whoe seeth mee
Seeth my Father, I tell yt thee.

(Chester 15/221-222)

The plays tell the audience about the identity of Christ both
through the perceptions of their characters, and by presenting
Christ's own ideas of his identity. By showing who Christ is, the
Holy Week plays prepare the audience to understand the meaning
of his trials and crucifixion.
The Last Supper from The Holkham Bible Picture Book
Chapter 2

What is soothnes?: the uncertainty of truth in the trial plays

PILATUS
What is soothnes, tell thou mee?

JESUS
Soothnes came from Goddes see

PILATUS
In yeart then hath trueth no postie
by thyne opinion?

(Chester 16/283-286)

The first task of a court of law in its administration of justice is to ascertain the truth of circumstances under scrutiny, and a comparable concern for the discovery and revelation of truth is at the heart of the trial scenes of the Chester and York cycles. As Jesus comes before a succession of judges, the truth they seek to establish in each instance is the truth of his identity. This question, which was such an important theme in the plays of Holy Week, comes under scrutiny again in the trial plays, as his antagonists attempt to
prove in court his identity as a traitor and troublemaker, so as to have him sentenced to death. Sometimes the judges of the different courts seem to be trying to discover the truth, like Herod in the York play who warns his court: ‘loke ye telle vs no tales but trewe’ (York 31/78). However, more frequently it is their own version of the truth the judges are seeking to promote. Although sometimes opaque to the characters on the stage, the truth is nevertheless an integral aspect of the trial plays, which would be clear at all times to the audience. The trial plays highlight some of the problems inherent in earthly trials and the fallibility of earthly judges in contrast with the perfect judgment of Christ.

Each of the trials in the mystery cycles represents a part of the medieval legal structure in England, identified by Maureen Mulholland as ‘a society of interlocking and co-existent legal systems, each of which jealously guarded its rights.’¹ In the Passion sequences of the York and Chester cycles, the trials of Jesus are represented by the Chester play of The Fletchers, Bowiers, Cowpers, and Stringers Playe: The Trial (Play 16), and by the York plays of Christ before Annas and Caiaphas (Play 29); Christ before Pilate I: The Dream of Pilate’s wife (Play 30); Christ before Herod (Play 31); The Remorse of Judas (Play 31); and Christ before Pilate II: The Judgement (Play 33). As Jesus is brought before successive judges, the plays illustrate comparisons between God’s truth and the verdicts reached by the courts of the church and of

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secular jurisdiction. They demonstrate the battle over the ownership of truth which is fought out in these arenas. Since the audience would be in the position of seeing more than the characters on stage, and knowing more than they knew, as each major character gives his own interpretation of the truth, the plays invite the audience to compare the characters' version of the truth with the real truth. It is the contention of this chapter that these plays deliberately make reference to contemporary and familiar trial settings in order to demonstrate the relevance to their audience of the trials of Christ.

It is important to understand that to most members of the medieval audiences watching the trial plays the courtroom setting was a familiar one. An array of local cases was regularly heard in the manorial courts, and in addition to these secular courts, each diocese had its own set of courts where ecclesiastical cases were adjudicated. Commenting on the 'ubiquity and variety of these courts throughout England,' R.H Helmholz pointed out that 'most English men and women would have lived in proximity to one or other of these courts.' The fact that the dramatists who worked on the play cycles chose to depict the trial scenes in such detail is an indication of popular interest in legal processes in the later Middle Ages. Because the audiences of the trial plays were familiar with court settings in their own neighbourhoods, they would have been able to identify with the audiences represented on the stage; in this

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way the plays would have created a sense of immediacy for the audience and an involvement in the drama being played out in front of them.

Attendance in court was so popular that the courtrooms were frequently full — the records ‘regularly describe the presence of people in the courts “in a copious multitude”.’ Under such crowded conditions, to enforce any separation between the audience and those directly participating in a trial must surely have been impossible, particularly as many of the audience would have been indirectly involved in the trial to a greater or lesser extent as witnesses, family members, or friends. The presentation in both art and drama of the trial scenes of the Passion often reflected contemporary circumstances by depicting a court overflowing with people, with the audience almost indistinguishable from the key players in the drama. Contemporary experience of audience involvement in the action of court trials is reflected in the trial scenes of the mystery plays. The staging of the cycle dramas, particularly those performed on pageant wagons, was such that, as Richard Beadle observes, the ‘proximity of players and audience meant that although the latter could not influence the course of events, they were none the less implicated to bear witness.’ Like the courts which they depicted, the action of the trial dramas would have involved close participation by the audience.

*Beadle and King, eds., York Mystery Plays, p.xxv.
Chapter 2: What is soothnes?

A further correlation between the trial plays and contemporary trials is illustrated in the picture of the trial before Caiaphas in The Holkham Bible Picture Book. Caiaphas, confronting Jesus, is surrounded by such a press of people that one of the soldiers, gripping Jesus’s robe, has to squeeze himself awkwardly between Jesus and Caiaphas in order to whisper in Caiaphas’s ear. The almost-suffocating closeness in this picture illustrates the disdain with which Jesus is jostled in sharp distinction to the reverence due to the majesty of God or even to the respectful concession of personal space accorded to a king or ruler. In contrast, Pilate in Chester’s trial play is able to choose how closely his inferiors will approach him, an effect that in the close confines of a pageant wagon could only be achieved by crowding the rest of the cast into one section of the playing space, emphasising the difference in status between those allocated breathing space and those required to squash up. Pilate’s graciously condescending invitation to Annas and Caiaphas to share his judicial bench with him: ‘Come up, lordinges, I you praye’ (Chester 16/136), sets the deference demanded by figures in authority against the contempt with which Jesus is treated.

Hierarchy is important in the trial plays, particularly those of York, because it establishes who is most fit to judge. Each of the judges seeks to establish himself as the most worthy to judge, and one aspect of the trial plays is about the resultant jostling for position among the judges. The judges also use hierarchy to establish their position relative to Christ. The reason that Caiaphas

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5 Hassall, ed., The Holkham Bible Picture Book, fol.29.

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in Chester and Pilate in York are so angered by the charge that Christ claimed the power to judge all mankind is because it effectively means that Christ out-ranks them. The threat to the York Pilate's place in the hierarchy eventually provides the catalyst for his pronouncement of judgment on Christ.

Both the York and Chester plays of the trials of Christ make reference to contemporary legal procedures and the search for truth implicit in these processes, but each cycle imbues the trial dramas with its own particular emphasis. Although each cycle examines the identity of Christ, each play has a different perspective on the implications of this identity to the other characters and the audience. In the Chester play, Christ is concerned solely to show the Father, and only speaks in order to do so, and the reactions of the other characters depend on whether they are inclined to believe him or not. In York, while maintaining silence throughout most of each play, Jesus also enters into dialogue with his accusers, in which he not only explains who he is, but defends himself against their charges, and questions the legality of their trials. The development of events in the trials is tied in with the attitudes towards the identity of Christ on the part of the judges and their subordinates. The contrast between the truth of his identity and the treatment he receives is linked to the experience of contemporary trials in the lives of their audiences. A comparison of the trial plays with the procedures of medieval trials can shed light on the significance that the trial plays would have had for their medieval audiences. Through these investigations we may gain an appreciation of the ways in which the staging of the
Chapter 2: What is soothness?

trial plays in each cycle may have contributed to the audience's perception of the religious meaning in the plays.

Chester

CAYPHAS
Ye hearen all what he sayes here.
Of wytnes nowe what neede were,
for before all these folke in feere
lowdlye thou liyes?
What saye you men that nowe binne here?
(Chester 16/54–58)

Chester's Trial play, The Fletchers, Bowiers, Cowpers, and Stringers Playe (Play 16), shows the process whereby Christ is condemned to death through the manipulation of the truth in a succession of trials, before Annas and Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod. From the ecclesiastical court of Annas and Caiaphas to the secular court of Pilate, the play explores different courts and their relationship to the trials of Christ. From the account in David Rogers's Breviary we can estimate that the play was probably presented on a single pageant wagon, described as 'like a howse with 2 rowmes beinge open on the tope, the lower rowme theie. appaerrelled and dressed them selues. and the higher rowme[5s] theie played.' The necessity of staging all these trials on the one pageant wagon would provide the opportunity for an examination of the similarities and differences between the trials as one trial

6 Clopper, ed., REED: Chester, p.239.
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succeeded another in the same location. As scene followed scene on this wagon, there would necessarily be movement on and off the pageant cart to show Christ's progress from one court to the next, emphasising the circularity of the trials as they repeatedly consider the question of Christ's identity.

While the similarities between the various trials are highlighted by their staging location, the disparities between them are signalled by their different judges. Each trial is representative of a different kind of trial in operation during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The court of Annas and Caiaphas is patently representative of the ecclesiastical court, since the high priests are addressed by the Jews as 'Syr byshoppes' (Chester 16/1). The presiding judge in each trial would have worn a costume that not only uniquely identified him, but also signified the nature of the trial taking place; since the records of the Coopers' guild have several references to the loan or hire of 'ij copes,' presumably these refer to the episcopal garments worn by Annas and Caiaphas.7 The opening lines of the play are reminiscent of a formal charge, indicating that Annas and Caiaphas are in session as Jesus is brought before them by his accusers:

Syr byshopps, here we have brought
a wretch that mych woe hase wrought
and would bringe our lawe to naught—
right soe hath hit spurned.

(Chester 16/1-4)

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7 See Clopper, ed., REEL: Chester, p.87, 97, 96, 108.
Chapter 2: What is soothnes?

In ecclesiastical hearings since the end of the twelfth century, the most common form of trial procedure in use was the inquisitorial process. In his study on medieval inquisitions, Henry Ansgar Kelly points out that ‘the essence [...] of inquisition, was that instead of an accuser the judge himself presented the charges against a defendant.’ In order to test the viability of a heresy case, before the trial could begin it was necessary to establish the bad reputation or infamy of the person charged, by bringing reports of defamation against them. As Kelly points out, in these heresy trials the judge could only charge an individual with committing a certain crime on the basis of publica fama, that is, if he was ‘infamous’ by reputation, and that ‘trustworthy members of the community considered the defendant guilty.’ Initially, the trial before Annas and Caiaphas follows this familiar course, as the Jews report first on Christ’s character: ‘a wretch that mych woe hase wrought’ (Chester 16/2), before he is brought into the court. The reference to contemporary heresy trials intersects at this point with the Biblical report that ‘many spake false witnes against him.’

Canonical rules of due process clearly set out the responsibilities of a judge. He was ‘obliged to give any detained or summoned person a precise statement of the charged crime, to explain the nature of the charges, to allow or provide counsel and

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9 Kelly, *Inquisitions and Other Trials*, I:446.
10 Kelly, *Inquisitions and Other Trials*, I:446.
11 Mark 13:56.
other defenses, and to prove that the person was considered guilty of the crime by respectable members of the community before insisting on a response to the charges or to any questioning. If this procedure was not followed correctly, the prisoner had the right to remain silent. The trial before Annas and Caiaphas follows the third part of this procedure by having the two Jews testify against Jesus. However, because the rest of the procedure is not followed, Jesus has the right to remain silent, and in a court of law, Caiaphas as judge should have warned him of that right. Instead, when Jesus asserts his right to remain silent and the judge reacts in anger, the emphasis on Caiaphas’s angry reaction to Christ’s very proper stance signifies that the play is showing this trial to be illegal. By speaking, Jesus might say something he could be convicted for, and Caiaphas’s anger seems to indicate that this is what he had hoped for. The importance placed on Christ’s silence in the play is highlighted by Caiaphas’s reaction, suggesting that in performance this silence is intended to dominate the scene:

**Caiaphas**

Saye, Jesu, to this what sayne yee?  
Thow wotest nowe what is put on thee.  
Put forth, prince, thy postage  
and perceive what the preven.  
What, devill! One worde speakes not hee!  
(Chester 16/37-41)

By keeping silence in response to these charges Christ makes it clear that these are not the real concern of the court. The

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central issue at stake is the question of his identity, and the only
time he speaks is when he is questioned about this directly:

CAYPHAS
Yett, Jesu, here I conjure thee,
if thou be Goddes Sonne, before mee
answere to that the meven.

(Chester 16/42-44)

Christ’s reply to Caiaphas reveals his understanding of his
own identity:

I am Goddes Sonne almightye,
and here I tell thee truelye
that me yet shall thou see
syrt on Goddes right hand him bye,
mankyn in clowdes to justefye.

(Chester 16/45-50)

The post-Reformation Banns for the Chester plays decreed
that the actor playing Jesus must wear ‘face-gilt’ in order to make
it obvious that he was not seeking to pass himself off as God but
merely to represent him. Since Jesus would be the only person
with a golden face on the stage in this play, the audience would
have visual proof that Christ is telling the truth, and he is ‘Goddes
Sonne.’ This truth that he tells Caiaphas ‘truelye’ proves to be
unacceptable to the high priests, and particularly to Caiaphas. The
trial is therefore presented as a trial of truth.

By announcing his right to judge mankind, Jesus shows that
the present trial is invalid, since he is of a higher ranking than his

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judge. At this point, in the Gospels, the high priest tears his clothes in his rage. Contemporary wall-paintings representing this incident show Caiaphas tearing open the front of his gown as if in the grip of an apoplexy, and his stuttering fury in the play: “Justifie! Marve, fye, fye on thee, fye!” (Chester 16/51) implies the use of this gesture in the drama as well. As an illustration of the flimsiness of earthly power in the face of heaven’s supremacy, little could be more striking than the sight of Caiaphas tearing his rich bishop’s robes before Jesus in his simple seamless robe.

Since the trial of Jesus before Annas and Caiaphas has been shown to be illegal, the culpability of the Jews in continuing to hold Jesus is aggravated by the buffeting administered to him, punishing him for a blasphemy he is not guilty of. Physical punishments such as whippings and beatings were a common outcome of trials, but were only legal after due process of law. Bracton’s well-known medieval treatise on law decreed ‘that prisoners should not be subjected to painful measures except after lawful judicial sentence and strictly in accordance therewith.’ The illegality of the buffeting in this instance is shown by the fact that it is administered without a formal sentence, and does not even signal the end of the judicial process, since the case is deferred to Pilate’s court. Rather, it is meted out as an interim sentence, but in the actual courtroom rather than a place of punishment. Writing on medieval criminal charges, Trevor Dean comments that ‘The

14 Mathew 26:65; Mark 14:63.
15 See Schiller, Iconography of Christian Art, figs.190 & 192.

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great seriousness of blasphemy can be gauged by the nature of the penalties: corporal rather than monetary."\(^{17}\) Blasphemers were punished by mutilation, especially of the lips and tongue, and by lashing. As the Jews buffet Christ, their charge is that he has harmed them by lying and making the 'lawe false' (Chester 1679). That is, as well as blasphemy he is accused of perjury, both crimes seen as emanating from the mouth. The punishment inflicted by the Jews takes the form of ritual, beginning with assaults by the mouth in the form of spitting then escalating into the violence of blows. The impression that the heresy trial has been turned on its head is confirmed: because they reject Jesus as the son of God, the Jews themselves are guilty of heresy. In performance, as Jesus is placed on a stool by the Jews for the buffeting, he would necessarily be positioned at the centre of the stage so that the Jews could surround him and come at him from all sides in their cruel version of Blind Man's Bluff. His centrality on the stage, as in iconography, represents in visual terms, as Pamela Sheingorn has explained, 'both God's eternal existence and his position as lord of creation,'\(^{18}\) so that the heretical nature of the buffeting would be clearly established. As the Jews spit in the golden face of Christ, and cover it with a veil to play their game, their actions would clearly reinforce their intention to obscure the truth of Jesus.

Whereas the trial before Caiaphas is a model for the spiritual and ecclesiastical concerns of church courts, Chester's

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first trial before Pilate is reminiscent of a court of the King's Bench, concerned with secular jurisdiction. At the same time it also has reference to manorial courts, probably because this is the form of secular judgment that the audience would be more familiar with. The exploration of truth and falsehood is continued into this trial, as differing attitudes towards the truth bring the Roman governor and the Jews into conflict. In his concern to uncover the truth, Pilate can be seen as 'an example of contemporary British justice,' as he is in the picture of this trial in the Holkham Bible Picture Book.19

However, this trial is as much concerned with the politics of earthly power as it is with justice. Having already shown that his chief aim is to accomplish the death of Jesus, Caiaphas brings the charge before Pilate that is most likely to realise this ambition — that of treason. In preaching against the imperial tribute, Jesus has set himself up against Caesar, and therefore, Caiaphas says, 'Wist Caesar that, he would be woo, / such a man and we let goo' (Chester 16/150-1). In his reaction to this implied threat, the justice of Pilate is shown to be flawed by political self-interest as he uses ceremonial speech in an effort to impress the high priests and get them on his side by flattery and favour:

Per vous, syr Cayphas; dye vos, syr Annas
et sum desepte Judas; vel atres in fuit.
come up, lordinges, I you praye,

and we shall here what he will saye
amonge this fellowshipe here.

(Chester 16/134-138)

The resulting stage configuration would show Christ standing alone in front of the three judges in an arrangement which visually reinforces the play’s opposition of worldly and spiritual forces.

Pilate’s decision to defer the trial to Herod is often seen as a vacillating play to evade responsibility for Christ’s death, but in the context of the times it reflects the care for demarcation which was an aspect of the justice system. With a number of separate and overlapping judiciaries in medieval England, jurisdiction over a case could often be claimed by more than one court. The play shows Pilate’s resolve to send Christ to Herod as a determination to comply with the letter of the law:

\[
\text{elles rafte I him his royaltie} \\
\text{and blemished his renowne.}
\]

(Chester 16/153-154)

In contrast with the other trials in the Chester play, the appearance of Christ before Herod bears no relation to a trial in a contemporary law court, as there are no charges and no witnesses presented, and no judgement given. Instead, the scene depicts a hearing before a king, demonstrating contrasts between worldly kingship and heavenly rule, with Herod as an antitype of Christ.

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Like Jesus, Herod too wore a mask, and as the only masked characters in this scene, their unique relationship would be obvious to the audience. The correspondence between Jesus and Herod is one also recognised in contemporary art. In the illustration of ‘The trial before Herod’ in the Holkham Bible Picture Book, where Herod is the tallest figure in the picture apart from Christ, their symmetrical placement on either side of the vertical axis gives to their encounter the appearance of a meeting between equals. As they face each other, Christ in his halo and Herod in his crown, each is apparently secure in his own royalty.

In highlighting the comparison between Jesus and Herod, the play makes a connection between royalty and madness when Herod asserts that he is ‘nigh wood for woo’ (Chester 16/187), before he decides that Christ is ‘a doted doo, or frenticke’ (Chester 16/189-190), and orders his soldiers to dress Christ in the white gown of a fool. Since one of the Jews then makes the point that Christ is dressed in ‘the kinges liverye’ (Chester 16/205), this seems to indicate that Herod as well as Jesus would be wearing white, and that the white gown of the fool is interchangeable with the king’s attire. This impression is confirmed by another retainer, whose speech seems to link Christ and Herod together in royalty:

Put thee forth, Thou may not flee.
nowe thou art in thy royaltie!

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* In the Coopers’ records for 1574 there is an account for ‘the mendinge of arrates vysar.’ Clopper, ed., REED: Chester, p.109.
* Hassall, ed., The Holkham Bible Picture Book, fol.30v.
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syr Herode, kinge, beleve on thee
and grantmercye this guyfye.
(Chester 16/207-210).

If the superficial correspondence between Christ and Herod is indeed evident in performance, the real points of difference between them would be equally visible. In contrast with Christ's silence and gravity, Herod's loquacity and frivolity shows that his interest in Christ's power is purely for its entertainment value:

I pray thee, say nowe to mee,
and prove some of thy postie,
and mych the gladder would I bee,
truly, all this yeare.
(Chester 16/175-178)

Like a Lord of Misrule rather than a genuine judge, Herod is interested in tricks rather than in the truth. His court turns out to be a carnival court, with Herod a King of Fools rather than a true king.

The complete disinterest in the process of law shown in the trial before Herod signals the beginning of a disintegration in the veneer of justice. The onset of this decay becomes evident in the second trial before Pilate, after the case is referred back to him by Herod. Pilate's court now appears more crowded, with shouting and unruly conduct, as his good intentions are overruled by the crowd and he loses control of the behaviour in the court. On three separate occasions Pilate attempts to declare Christ 'Not Guilty', but each time he bows to the protests of the Jews (Chester 16/143-146; 215-220; 291-294). According to manorial court rolls of the fifteenth century, this situation reflects contemporary conditions in
many manorial courts, where 'increasing examples of disorder and of the inability of stewards to control the proceedings' were recorded. Pilate's susceptibility to the opinions of others is underlined by Jesus when Pilate asks him a second time if he is king of the Jews. 'Whither hopes thou yt so be,' asks Jesus, 'or other men tould hit the?' (Chester 16/255-256).

Openness was an important aspect of medieval court procedure, and any suggestion of secrecy was regarded with suspicion. As they were held 'at the heart of the manor,' manorial trials normally fulfilled this requirement to be public, and when Pilate washes his hands to abnegate responsibility for Christ's fate, he makes the point that he is doing it in front of witnesses:

PILATUS
Nowe sythen I see you so fervent
and shapen that he shalbe shent
wash I will here in your present
waxe ye never so woodd.
Yee shall all wytt verament
that I am cleane and innocent
and for to sheed in no intent
this rightwise mans bloodd.

(Chester 16/255-256)

Through its representation in books, wall paintings and roof bosses, the image of Pilate's attempt to abdicate his responsibility for the Crucifixion by washing his hands would be

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familiar to the audience of the plays. Contemporary pictures of this scene, such as the illustration in the Biblia Pauperum, show Pilate's body twisted away from the hand basin as he keeps his eyes on Jesus, as if troubled by what he is doing. In performance, as in these familiar depictions, the recreation of this well-known image would inevitably emphasise the breakdown of justice.

In contrast to the publicity of the hand-washing, Pilate's withdrawal to talk privately with Annas and Caiaphas is seen as a loss of openness. In the crowded conditions on the pageant wagon, this private discussion would necessarily appear as a furtive huddle, the very opposite of the transparency of justice. The collusion between Pilate and the high priests signals the beginning of a cycle of corruption, as the high priests blackmail Pilate by invoking Caesar, and Pilate succumbs to their threats.

Just as in contemporary pictures of the trial scenes, Christ is always the focal point, and almost invariably at the centre of the picture, so in the dramas the action continually revolves around him, and in performance the business of the play would be conducted with him at centre stage. In the small playing area of a pageant wagon, where movement is necessarily deliberate and significant, Christ's stillness and centrality would emphasise his

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25 For books, see examples in Henry, ed., Biblia Pauperum, sig.-b.; Hassall, ed., The Holkham Bible Picture Book, fol.30v; for wall paintings see, for example Rickert, Painting in Britain, Plate 159(B); for roof bosses see the example in Davidson, Drama and Art, Plate VI, Ex.L.
26 Henry, ed., Biblia Pauperum, sig.-b.; See also Schiller, Iconography of Christian Art, figs.204–210, 220, 222–224.
silence in contrast with the speech and movement around him. As Rosemary Woolf points out, Christ's silence in these scenes 'dominates the stage.' In the first half of the plays he speaks only twice, each time to confirm his identity. It is not until his second trial before Pilate that he speaks at length, in an extended discussion with Pilate about his identity and its relationship to the truth. Once again, as in the trial before Annas and Caiaphas, hierarchy is reversed. In seeking answers to philosophical questions Pilate defers to Jesus and acknowledges his superior understanding:

PILATUS
What is soothnes, tell thou me?

JESUS
Soothnes came from Goddes see.

PILATUS
In yearth then hath trueth no postie
By thyne opinion?

JESUS
Howe should on yearth bee
while so deemed in yearth is hee
of them that have non authoritie
in yearth, agaynst reason?

(Chester 16/283-290)

With his magisterial responses, Christ aligns himself with the truth, while his answers at the same time refute the earlier charges that he is a liar. In the Gospel accounts Pilate's question: 'Vwhat is truth?' (John 18:38) is not answered, but in this unique

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In the Chester trial play, Christ is set against first one judge and then another, as each judge endeavours to establish his higher ranking. Even Caesar is invoked. As Pilate is coerced to surrender Jesus to the Jews, the staging of this scene would present two ideas of kingship to the audience. The first is that of Christ who, dressed in royal garments of purple and white, and crowned with thorns, claims a kingdom that is not of this world. Set against the kingship of Christ is that of Caesar, present only in negatives as a hypothetical alternative king of the Jews, a pretext for their rejection of Jesus as king. As the distant ruler Caesar is perversely claimed as king by a conquered people only because by doing so they can reject one of their own, and his shadow looms in the threats of Annas and Caiaphas:

Nay syr, forsooth, no kinge have wee
save the emperour of Rome pardee.

(Chester 16/357-358)

In the final episode of the Chester trial play, the denial of Peter re-examines and comments upon perceptions of truth and evidence as exercised in the trials of Christ. In the Biblical narrative this episode is located just after the arrest of Jesus, at the beginning of his trials, but by positioning this scene out of its

\[30\text{Peter W. Travis points out that this episode is found only in the Chester play.}
\text{Travis, Dramatic Design, p.182.}\]
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Biblical sequence the Chester cycle presents it as a further trial, in contrast to the trials of Christ. Like these trials, it too contains accusers and a charge, but whereas in the earlier trials Christ is silent, in this trial Peter speaks to deny the charges. Both Peter and his accusers claim the truth for themselves, but whereas in Christ’s trials the one accused is in the right, in this instance it is the accusers who are right. Peter’s final emphatic denial, calling not just on truth and evidence, but ‘in fayth’ as well, recalls the definition of faith in Hebrews, as ‘the substance of things to be hoped for, the argument of things not appearing’ (Hebrews 11:1). Peter’s denial is thus not just the denial of the facts as laid out before them, but a denial of faith. In denying the truth and bearing false witness against himself Peter is in effect pronouncing the verdict and punishment on himself:

Shame have I, and myckell woo,
if ever I did him before knowe
or keepe him companye.

(Chester 16/392-394)

The various trials of Jesus in the Chester play draw comparisons with contemporary trials to demonstrate the centrality of Christ’s truth to the world in which the plays were performed. The staging of his trial in a crowded court would have reflected the circumstances of local ecclesiastical and manorial courts. His gold mask, identifying his divine character, would give a pointed dramatic irony to the accusations of blasphemy by the play’s antagonists, and to the mocking of his tormentors in the buffetting and scourging scenes. The white robe of the fool would become the garment of kingship in the mocking scene, turning
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Pilate's deliberate irony in presenting Jesus to the Jews as 'your kinge' (Chester 16/356) into a straightforward statement of fact. The nature of truth, explored in each of the trials, from Caiaphas's accusation of lies in the first trial to the conversation between Christ and Pilate in the last, would receive its final telling explication in the denial of Peter.

York

ANO

Oyes. Jesu, jou Jewe of gentill Jacob kynne,
Jou nerteist of Nazareth, now neuent is bi name.
Alle creatures pe accuses. We cammaunde pe comme in
And aanswer to bi enemys, defende now thy fame.
(York 33/264-267)

When Annas prompts the Beadle to proclaim the coming of Jesus into court in the Tilemakers Play of Christ before Pilate 2; The Judgement, he sparks off a series of events in which even inanimate objects challenge his view of Christ and Christ's place in the hierarchy of his world. In the trial plays of the York cycle the kingship of Christ, established in the Holy Week plays, is challenged by his antagonists. The challenge takes the form of an investigation into hierarchy as Christ's antagonists, who are now his judges, lay claim to positions of power.

The attention given to Christ's trials in the York cycle is extraordinary. Out of the 47 plays in the cycle,\textsuperscript{31} five plays are

\textsuperscript{31} Numbering of the plays varies in different editions — I have taken the numbering from Richard Beadle's edition. Beadle, ed., York Plays.
devoted to the process whereby Christ is condemned to death, from the time of his arrest to the beginning of his journey to Calvary. Four of the plays discuss the trials of Christ, while the fifth, *The Remorse of Judas*, also makes a contribution to this treatment of trials. Incorporated into the plays are episodes from all four Gospels, as well as additional elements in the popular tradition, used both for their entertainment value and for their relevance to the message of the plays. Such extended detail in the treatment of these events argues for their importance to the didactic scheme of the cycle. By presenting the trials of Jesus with reference to contemporary trials, and through the actions and motivations of the various people involved, the trial plays appear focused on bringing home the audience's own implication in the pains and processes whereby Jesus was condemned to death.

The question of the discovery of truth, which in the Chester play is explicitly discussed, is approached more obliquely in the York plays, but is nevertheless integral to the development of the proceedings, while references to contemporary courts and trials shed light on issues of truth which would be highlighted during the action of these plays. As the judges demand deference from everyone who comes within their ambit, the motif of homage and bowing within the context of the pursuit of truth raises the question: Who is truly worthy of honour? And in the context of the law the plays ask: What is the true law, and who is the rightful upholder of this law?

The presentation of Peter's denial in Play 29: *Christ before Annas and Caiaphas* has reference to a relevant dilemma which
would implicate the audience in the trials from the very beginning. In medieval inquisitorial trials, witnesses ran the risk of being forced to testify not only about the accused, but also about themselves. In what Henry Ansgar Kelly refers to as ‘one of the most flagrant abuses of due process devised by the papal inquisitors hereticae pravitatis (inquisitors of heretical depravity),’ an ordinary person like Peter who was called as a witness in a heresy trial faced the very real fear that he might find himself indicted through his own evidence. Kelly notes that in such circumstances ‘persons summoned as general witnesses to local heresy were forced to testify not only about others but also about themselves — de se et aliis; and any doctrinal misstatement they might make — after being required, for instance, to explain their understanding of the Creed — constituted an instant notorious crime that could be charged against them.’ In the context of the heresy trial Peter’s appearance of fearfulness, like that of a wild creature (‘a nape’, ‘a brokke’ and ‘a nowele’), would have a particular resonance for the audience.

Whereas the Chester cycle locates Peter’s denial at the end of the trial play, the York playwright has chosen to follow Luke’s gospel and place the episode before Jesus is arraigned before Caiaphas, and just as he is about to be brought into Caiaphas’s court. This episode sets the pattern for the trial of Christ which is to follow, as it shows each side laying claim to the truth. Peter

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32 Kelly, Inquisitions and Other Trials, V.2.
33 See Luke 22:54-62. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, the denial of Peter takes place towards the end of Jesus’s trial before the Sanhedrin, see Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72.
alleges 'Pou haste þe mismarkid, trewly be traste' (York 29/121), while Malchus asserts his own truthfulness: 'of tokenyng of trouth schall I telle yowe' (York 29/139). However, because in this instance the accusers are telling the truth and the accused is lying, the plays set up a contrast with Christ's truthfulness in the ensuing trial scene.

A further important element in this scene is found in the staging of Peter's denial around a fire: 'By þe feruent fire to fleme hym fro colde' (York 29/94), an episode which also occurs in the Gospel accounts. In Biblical narratives from the burning bush to Pentecost, fire has represented the presence and power of God, and its importance to this event was recognised in contemporary art such as the painting of this scene in The Holkham Bible Picture Book, where the fire is the central image. In the absence of a true witness in this scene, the fire is a witness to the truth.

The York play of the trial before Annas and Caiaphas is an indictment on contemporary ecclesiastical trials. Caiaphas demands reverence on the basis of a self-proclaimed expertise in canon law:

And trewe tente vnto me þis tym þat ye take,
For I am a lorde lerned lelly in youre lay.
(York 29/3-4)

However, the grounds for his demand are shown to be false, and his vaunted learning an illusion, when his attempts to have

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Jesus killed betray an ignorance of the law which Annas must correct:

**ANNA**

Nay sir, j'an blemyshe yee prelatis estate,
3e awe to deme no man to dede for to dynge.

**CAYPHAS**

Why sir? So were bettir j'an be in debate,
Ye see he boy will nost bowe for oure bidding.

**ANNA**

Nowe sir, ye muste presente his boy vnto sir Pilate
For he is domysman nere and nexte to he king.
(29/336-341)

In spite of accusing Jesus of ‘false happenyng’ (York 29/40), Caiaphas thus proves that his own command of the truth is tenuous. The play further underlines the corruption of the ecclesiastical court by showing a bishop, still richly dressed in cope and mitre, indulging in the sins of gluttony and sloth, as Caiaphas savours the ‘licoure full delicious’ (York 29/77) before being put to bed on the seat of judgment — the ‘dees’ (York 29/81).

Even more so than Chester’s Trial Play, the York plays show the attention accorded to different levels of hierarchy by those at or near the top of the ladder of status. When Caiaphas invites Annas to ‘come nere and sitt we bothe in fere’ (York 29/201) he does so partly to show that he can; he still maintains the leading role in the trial. From a staging point of view this enables Annas and Caiaphas to be seated on the judicial bench in

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counterposition to Christ when he is led in. Although at this time
trials could be held in private houses, Caiaphas's use of the dais
both for sleeping and for the administration of justice gives his
court a curious quality of invalidity, as if the judgments that are
made there will not hold up. In his definition of what constitutes a
trial, Joseph Jaconelli comments, 'as an almost invariable rule, they
take place in public.' The covert nature of the trial before Annas
and Caiaphas, borne out by Christ's accusation that they bring him
'by nyght' and 'with brondes vnbrente' (York 29/318-319), thus
highlights its illegality. Although Pamela King comments that 'all
the trials take place in secret circumstallces,' the secrecy
attending this first trial is particularly marked. When Jesus comes
before the high priests, at first Caiaphas tries to question Jesus
privately (York 29/272), but Jesus is silent, and will only talk to
Caiaphas in the open court, confirming his claim that he only
'prechid wher pepull was moste in present' (York 29/314). This
difference in attitude of the two protagonists highlights the
difference between the truth of Christ and the deceit of the priests.
Although Caiaphas and Christ each accuse the other of lying (York
29/320, 329), the question of who is in the right is never in doubt,
since Caiaphas has already proved himself to be a liar.

36 The inventory of the Corpus Christi guild in 1465 lists 'vna mitra papalis
37 J.H. Baker, An Introduction to English Legal History, Fourth ed. (London:
38 Joseph Jaconelli, "What Is a Trial?," in Judicial Tribunals in England and Europe,
1200-1700, ed. Maureen Mulholland and Brian Pullan, with Anne Pullan, The Trial in
39 Pamela M. King, "Contemporary Cultural Models for the Trial Plays in the York
Cycle," in Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe, ed. Alan
Hindley (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), p.204.
Chapter 2: What is soothnes?

In the buffeting which takes place in the trial before Caiaphas there is an obvious application to the use of torture. Although increasingly frowned on in the later Middle Ages, torture was still officially condoned for use by ecclesiastical judges, especially, 'in the torture of vacillating witnesses or those of "vile condition".' In this instance the buffeting is clearly a perversion of legality since the tormentors of Jesus are seeking to 'lerne yone boy bettir to bende and bowe' (York 29/349) in an acknowledgement of Caiaphas's superior status, rather than any information pertaining directly to the trial. Whereas in Chester he is punished for blasphemy and perjury, in York he is punished for insubordination. Since, as in the Chester play, he is seated on a stool for the buffeting, his central position on stage would act as an ironic rebuttal of the soldiers' attempts to teach him to 'lout vnto ilke lorde' (York 29/351).

As in the equivalent scene in the Chester play, Pilate's court in Play 30: Christ before Pilate I: The Dream of Pilate's Wife, is representative of a manorial court. However, whereas Chester's scene of Christ's first appearance before Pilate is brief, taking only 45 lines, the York play gives this episode extended treatment. Although the justice administered in the court of Annas and Caiaphas is suspect, in Pilate's court the business of the law is done properly, with due attention to protocol. Pilate asks for a valid charge to be presented (York 30/417), and demands evidence (York 30/468). Jesus is asked for his plea: guilty or not guilty (York 30/470). The formality of the court is upheld, and

40 Kelly, Inquisitions and Other Trials, I:445.
insubordination from Annas is dealt with sternly (York 30/491-492, 495). Like the bailiff in a manorial court, the custodian of correct court procedure is the Beadle, who ensures that Pilate is ready to sit in judgment (York 30/82-86), receives Annas and Caiaphas with the proper etiquette (York 30/265) and begins court proceedings with the appropriate ceremony (York 30/368-369). A part of this attention to protocol is the ceremonious language with which he addresses Pilate:

My liberall lorde, o leder of lawis,
  O schynyng schawe pat all schames escheues,
I beseke you my souerlyne, assente to my sawes,
  As ye are gentill juger and justice of Jewes.
  (York 30/55-58)

By emphasising the studiously correct protocol and attention to form in the trial before Pilate, the play draws attention to the hollowness of legal formalism performed for its own sake rather than for the sake of justice. The Beadle's empty sycophancy towards Pilate is contrasted with his true reverence towards Jesus, emphasised both by his action of homage in kneeling to him (York 30/321) and by the simple sincerity of his language:

But firste schall I wirschippe /lists with witte and with
  will.
  This reverence I do /lists forthy,
  For wytes /lists wer wiser /lists lan,
  They worshipped /lists full holy on hy
  And with solemniteit sange Osanna till.
  (York 30/311-315)

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41 Mulholland, "Trials in Manorial Courts in Late Medieval England," p.94.
Peter W. Travis considers that ‘in creating Pilate’s Beadle as a “crypto-Christian,” the York Master seems implicitly to admit that Christ’s presence and his few words of truth were — in dramatic terms — not powerful enough to give the episodes the moral control and emotional balance they needed.’ However, this assessment may concentrate too much on the words of the play, where Christ speaks seldom, and may not take fully into account the visual impact that Christ’s presence would accomplish on the pageant wagon. In performance Christ would be central to all the action and in the midst of it as he is in paintings of the trials, and his dramatic importance is thus undeniable. The Beadle’s role in acknowledging Christ’s true nature is intended to provide a dramatic contrast to the contempt with which he is treated by the judges of the trials. It also provides a model for the audience to follow, as the Beadle recognises Christ’s true identity and bows to him.

The dream of Pilate’s wife in Play 30: Christ before Pilate I, provides the opportunity for a further disquisition on the nature of truth. The part of Dame Precious Percula was played by a man, and her role appears to be a prototype of the twentieth century pantomime Dame, with her self-praise presented as pure burlesque. It seems clear from the text that in performance the contrast between her appearance and her self-description as ‘all welle of all womanhede’ with a ‘countenaunce so comly and clere’ (lines 39-40) would be designed to show her as ludicrously lacking in truthfulness. At the same time this contrast would also provide the

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Travis, Dramatic Design, p.181.
vehicle whereby doubt is cast on Pilate's judgement even before the trial begins, since he accepts his wife's self-appraisal at her own evaluation. The marital affection between Pilate and his wife, initially charming, becomes something more unseemly as it is shown to be distracting Pilate from his judicial duties, and degenerates further with the visitation of the devil to Dame Percula. The idea of the devil in his black mask bending over the bed of Dame Percula, 'al nakid þis nyght as sche napped' (York 30/285), gives an unmistakable picture of illicit sexuality and the sin of lechery. By association with these sins, the dream and Dame Percula's message to Pilate are also seen as sinful, and an attempt to pervert the course of justice rather than to establish the truth.

After the solemn formality of Pilate's court in the previous play, the text of the play of Christ before Herod (Play 31) calls for a performance of noise, bluster and violence in a parody of the sobriety of legal procedure. Herod's demands for subservience which open the Litsters Play are evidently supposed to be accompanied by threatening gestures of the sword which is the instrument of his aggression:

Pes, ye brothellis and browlys in þis broydenesse inbrased,
And freykis þat are frendely your freykenesse to frayne,
Youre tounges fro tretyng of trifillis be trasde,
Or þis brande þat is bright schall breste in youre brayne.
(York 31/1-4)

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55 It seems clear that devils in the plays usually wore masks: the Mercer's pageant documents of 1433, for example, call for 'vj deuelles faces.' Johnston and Rogerson, eds., REED: York, p.55. Since devils in iconography were traditionally black, it seems likely that they would have worn black masks on the pageant stages.
The hyperbolic threats of violence in the tyrant's opening rant, the intimidating waving of his sword and his profane cursing all mark him as a terrifyingly unpredictable despot rather than an impartial judge. The play uses these threats of violence and Herod's disregard for proper judicial procedure to indicate that the rule of violence rather than justice prevails at Herod's court.

In the Synoptic Gospels, emphasis is placed on Christ's silence during his trials. Both York and Chester trial plays use this silence to dramatic effect, but nowhere more so than in York's trial before Herod, where Jesus does not speak at all. Amid the clamour of Herod's court, Christ's complete silence is thrown into sharp relief, highlighting a further dimension of the analogy of the cycle plays' trials with the real trials taking place in the England of the late Middle Ages. In both inquisitorial and common law courts a suspect might maintain silence, but the choice of silence on the part of the arrestee had a different application depending on which court he found himself in. In heresy cases, as Kelly has shown, remaining silent before being formally charged was especially important because 'one could be convicted not only for confessing a previously committed crime but also for expressing an opinion or belief that could be taken as a brand-new crime of false belief.' However, silence before a common law court meant something slightly different. From the thirteenth century, when jury trials began to supersede trial by ordeal as the normal method of ascertaining the truth, the law required 'that no one should

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45 Kelly, Inquisitions and Other Trials, III:993.
undergo jury trial without first consenting to it.'\(^46\) A suspect who did not wish to undergo jury trial would keep silent before the court and refuse to plead. By taking this option a defendant was able to ensure that 'his goods and land could not be forfeited and so lost to his heirs,'\(^47\) but in that case recalcitrant suspects were subjected to a regimen known as peine forte et dure in order to persuade them to enter a plea. The Vita Eduardi Secundi outlines the customary punishment 'for those mute of malice': 'The prisoner shall sit on the cold bare floor, dressed only in the thinnest of shirts, and pressed with as great a weight of iron as his wretched body can bear. His food shall be a little of the worst sort of bread, and his drink cloudy and stinking water. The day on which he eats he shall not drink, and the day on which he has drunk he shall not taste bread. He who survives this punishment beyond the fifth or sixth day would have strength beyond that of normal human nature.'\(^48\) Regardless of its brutality, peine forte et dure was 'an option open to every prisoner appearing in a royal court.'\(^49\) In both kinds of trials silence was the form of self-defence of those who had no other recourse to justice. By his refusal to speak, in spite of increasingly bizarre efforts on the part of Herod and his sons to


\(^{49}\) Summerson, "Peine Forte et Dure," p.123.
induce him to do so, Christ lays himself open to the possibility of enduring *peine forte et dure*, and is only reprieved by Herod’s sense of *amour propre*.

> Wherfore schulde we flaye hym or fleme hym  
> We fynde no3t in rollis of recorde;  
> And sen þat he is dome, for to deme hym,  
> Ware þis a goode lawe for a lorde?  
>  
> (York 31/400-403)

Rather than persist with the trial and ‘flaye hym or fleme hym’ in an attempt to obtain a plea, Herod recognises that his hands are tied, abandons the trial and sends Jesus back to Pilate. The play thus shows that the power of earthly law is not sufficient to overcome the divine will.

The over-arching action of the York trial plays is the impetus of Annas and Caiaphas towards persuading Pilate that Christ should be put to death. Because each play is complete in itself as well as being part of the cycle, the point of persuasion occurs in more than one play, but one of the main crisis points comes in Play 32: *The Remorse of Judas*. Whereas in the Chester play it is the threat of insurrection which convinces Pilate to condemn Jesus, in this play the argument which wins Pilate over strikes at his own concept of himself as the just judge of Judea — the assertion that even he will be subject to Christ’s judgment:

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50 Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p.248. Woolf points out that ‘the dramatist shows Pilate proceeding four times from an indifferent benevolence to anger against Christ, but these psychological movements should not be understood cumulatively: each play is a separate unit.’
This play achieves two important points in the didactic message of the Passion sequence. By showing Pilate succumbing to hubris in his decision to condemn Christ, the play highlights the sin of pride, and by showing the action of Judas's remorse, the play draws attention to the sin of despair. Although Christ does not appear in person in this play, it too is concerned with trials. Judas approaches the three judges like an appellant in a court of appeal, to plead for a reversal of the proceedings against Jesus. In a way, Judas is on trial here. His appearance before Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas recalls Jesus's prior appearance before them. Whereas Jesus was silent and resolute, neither swerving from his course, nor compromising his ideals, Judas has sold his master and friend but now changes his mind and tries to opt out of the responsibility for his actions. Caiaphas's repudiation of him is pronounced like a judgment, leaving no avenue for hope:

Bewscher, what is þat till vs?
Þe perill and þe plight is thyne.

Thyne is þe wronge, þou wroughte it.
Þou hight vs full trulye to take hym.
Chapter 2: What is soothnes?

And ours is he bargayne, we boughte it —
Loo, we are alle sente for to slee hym.
(York 32/163-168)

In bringing the conspiracy to a close, the action of this play emphasises the change in its configuration. Judas's repeated and unsuccessful appeals for a change of heart culminate in his offer to bind himself to Pilate as his faithful servant, a move designed to arouse derision amongst his audience off the stage as well as on it. His despair when he is refused this option is designed to teach the evils of despair, which was, as Eleanor Prosser comments, 'the most heinous of sins, a sin against the Holy Ghost.' The play is therefore designed primarily to show the people of the audience an example to avoid rather than to engage their sympathy.

In keeping with the theme of legal procedure that pervades these five plays, the sale of the potter's field is treated like a civil law case, with a corrupt judge twisting the verdict to promote his own interests. Pilate's swindling of the honest owner of the Potters' Field, exposes him as a petty criminal, in ironic contrast to his juridical role in the other trials over which he presides.

In the staging of the final play in this sequence, Play 33: Christ before Pilate 2: The Judgement the various unresolved trials are at long last resolved as this play sees Christ finally sentenced to death. In contrast to the earlier trials, Pilate's second trial is shown to be legal one: there is no secrecy, and the trial takes place in the open court; the correct procedures are followed as Christ is

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brought to the bar (York 33/145) and the prisoner is formally sentenced (York 33/450-461).

The question running through the previous trial plays about hierarchy and who is truly deserving of homage is brought to a dramatic conclusion as Christ’s claim to hierarchical superiority is ultimately recognised, not by humans, but by the banners intended to display Pilate’s eminence. In all the York trial plays the accent on hierarchy turns into the question of homage, on who owes homage, and to whom homage is due. The demands of the various leaders that Jesus should bow to them meet with no response, and in one of the most striking images of the trial plays the true lord is tellingly acknowledged, first by the spontaneous dipping of the banners in Pilate’s hall, and then, involuntarily, by Pilate and the bishops, who rise to their feet instinctively as Jesus enters the court after being called to defend himself (York 33/268-291). In contrast to the true homage accorded to Jesus is the mockery with which he is treated by the soldiers as they crown him with the crown of thorns:

I MILES

Aue, riall roy and rex judeorum,
Hayle, comely kyng þat no kyngdom has kende.
Hayll vndughty duke þi dedis ere dom,
Hayll, man vnmyghty þi menȝe to mende

III MILES

Hayll, lord without lande for to lende,
Hayll kyng, hayll knayve vnconand.
Chapter 2: What is soothing?

IV Miles
Hayl, freyke without forse þe to fende,
Hayl strang, þat may nat not wele stand
To strye.

(York 33/408–415)

This scornful series of anti-hails is an echo and a parody of the acclamation that Jesus received in his Entry into Jerusalem. Instead of endorsing his kingly attributes, these cries devalue his kingship, and in a curious way they unmake the kingship that was celebrated in the earlier play. Christ's total silence incurs a punishment consistent with the penalties incurred by prisoners who remain mute. In cases where a prisoner refused to plead it thereupon became understood that 'a suspect standing mute was refusing the common law,' and that by 'declining to plead he was depriving himself of that protection against ill-treatment which the law afforded to ordinary prisoners.' With such a blank cheque, the treatment of peine forte et dure became more extreme. By the middle of the fourteenth century, this treatment had become increasingly brutal, and frequently resulted in the death of the prisoner, particularly since some justices were in danger of forgetting the original purpose of this treatment, and using it solely as 'a punishment for obstinate silence.' The buffeting, scourging and mocking of Christ thus can be related to the peine forte et dure punishment:

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52 Summerson, "Peine Forte et Dure," p.121.
53 Summerson, "Peine Forte et Dure," p.121.
Chapter 2: What is soothnes?

PILATUS
Sir knyghts þat ar comly, take þis casstiff in keping,
Skelpe hym with scourges and with skathes hym scorne.
Wrayste and wrynge hym to, for wo to he be wepyng,
And þan bryng hym before vs as he was beforne.
(York 38/336-339).

In Play 38, The Tilemakers Play, the issue of Christ's identity which had preoccupied the trial play is brought to a resolution when Pilate presents Christ to the people:

Sirs, beholde vpon hight and ecce homo
(York 38/434)

He is presented not just to Annas and Caiaphas and the knights on the stage, but to the audience of the plays as well. As Jesus stands before the court with the crown of thorns on his head, the audience would have seen not just a king but the price of that kingship in the blood running down from the wounds made by the crown of thorns, as it is rammed down onto Christ's brow with such a force that 'His brayne begynnes for to blede'(York 38/401).

Conclusion

The subject of Christ's identity which was investigated in the earlier plays of the Passion is further explored in both the York and the Chester plays of the trials of Christ, as his antagonists seek to eliminate the threat he poses to their place in the hierarchy of power. In presenting the trials, the plays make reference to contemporary legal procedures and the search for truth implicit in

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these processes, in order to show the inadequacy of the fallible earthly law in its attempt to bring Christ to trial.

In its relationship to contemporary trials, the Chester play pays particular attention to the ecclesiastical court of Annas and Caiaphas, and by showing the influence exerted by the 'byshopps' on the process of the Pilate's trials the play appears to reflect an anxiety concerning the power of the church to affect civil affairs. By its very nature, this uneasiness is more likely to be traced to the sixteenth century religious upheavals rather than to concerns regarding the Lollards in earlier medieval productions of the Chester cycle. Christ's discussion with Pilate on the nature of truth suggests the importance to this cycle of an intellectual engagement with the nature of truth and the identification of Christ as the Son of God.

The matter under investigation in the York plays of the trials of Christ is not the guilt or innocence of Christ, since his identity has already been established in the previous plays. Rather, it is the reactions of the other people in these plays, particularly the judges themselves, to the identity of Christ. By showing the antagonists attempting to verify their own status, the plays demonstrate a concern with the identity of the antagonists in relation to Christ, and the problems of earthly power and the conflicting demands of faith and human allegiance as evidenced in the Beadle. In their further exploration of Christ’s identity, the York plays use the vulgarity of Dame Precious Percula and the bombastic violence of Herod to highlight Christ's silent majesty, while the movement and colour of the trials before Pilate provide
the occasion for the Beadle’s recognition of Christ’s royal nature and the miraculous acknowledgement of Christ by the bowing banners.

It is important to stress that the association of the trial plays with the real courts of the later Middle Ages is not necessarily an indictment of these courts (although some critical comment on abuses in these courts is clearly present), but rather that audience familiarity with the courts and the judicial process would have contributed to their understanding and appreciation of the plays’ intention to highlight the trials of Christ as part of the process of achieving mankind’s redemption. A consideration of the trials of Jesus in the light of contemporary trials was intended to make the trials relevant to the everyday life of their audiences.

As the trial plays of Chester and York investigate the nature of Christ’s identity, they also, through the graphic representation of penal measures in the buffeting and scourging, begin to uncover the cost of that identity. The violence which Christ suffers during the trials as a result of his identity becomes a precursor to the violence of the Crucifixion, and the link between his identity and violence becomes a major theme in the plays of the Crucifixion.
The Arrest and Trials from The Holkham Bible Picture Book

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Chapter 3

Doelfully dight: violence and suffering in the Crucifixion plays

II MARIA

Allas Ęs is a sithfull sight,
He ḫat was euere luffely and light
And lorde of high and lawe,
Oo, doufully nowe is he dight.
(York 34/150-154)

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MARIA MAGDALENA

Alas, howe should my hart be light
to see my seemely lord in sight
doelfully drawne and so dight
that did never man greivans?
(Chester 16A/265-268)

Representations of the trials and crucifixion of Christ in the iconography of the Late Middle Ages depict the sufferings of Christ with what seems to today's
sensibilities to be extraordinarily and unnecessarily graphic detail. The Crucifixion scenes of the mystery cycles are no exception to this trend, and in fact offer a prolonged exposition on the torments of the Passion in a way that static representations could not achieve. While the treatment of other Biblical episodes is often cursory or compressed, the violence of the Gospel accounts of the trials and crucifixion of Christ is stretched in the plays to its utmost possibilities. Christ is treated with horrifying brutality which, while often deliberately inflicted to exacerbate his sufferings, is at other times perpetrated carelessly and almost without rancour as the by-product of incompetence. In order to understand why the cruelty shown to Christ is given such significance in the Passion plays, it must be seen both in the religious and social context in which the plays were performed, and within the dramatic framework of the Passion sequence as a whole.

To modern attitudes the emphasis on violence in the Passion plays appears excessive, but if this aspect of the plays is considered in its late medieval context, it can be seen that the violence presented an important argument in promoting the didactic message of the plays. Late medieval theology regarding the crucifixion followed Anslem's argument that, as C.W. Marx defines it: 'humanity was in a state of sin and could not be reconciled with God unless sin were removed; only Christ was capable of doing this, and Christ's suffering and death were the
price of the redemption.'¹ The personal cost to Christ of the price paid for mankind's redemption received increasing emphasis in the late Middle Ages with the practice of affective piety, whereby the faithful Christian imaginatively entered into the sufferings of Christ or the sorrow of his mother at the cross. The proliferation of devotional representations in art and literature which focused on the suffering of Jesus is indicative of a precept that Ellen Ross identifies as 'one of the underlying tenets of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century spirituality — namely, that one understands through experience.'² Spiritually-inclined people, both lay and clerical, like Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, would meditate on the agonies of the Passion as a means of enabling them to enter into mystical communion with Christ through his pains. This tendency to concentrate on Christ's suffering as a way of fostering devotion was endorsed in late medieval preaching; a Lollard sermon, for example, stressed the idea that 'Christ’s suffering was an act of love to inspire love in the human heart.'³ In the cycle plays, the emphasis on the violence of the Crucifixion works to draw attention to the pains suffered by Christ on the cross, and thereby to invite a devotional response.

¹ Marx, The Devil's Rights, p.19.
³ Marx, The Devil's Rights, p.96. The sermon, for the feast of the Circumcision (New Year's Day), preached on the six sheddings of Christ's blood, emphasising after each example that Christ 'schewide to vs þe moost and þe hiest cause of loue' (line 250), and stressing that 'it was don for to geue vs oute of masure grete cause and materue to loue hym for euere' (lines 156-157). Gloria Cigman, ed., Lollard Sermons, Early English Text Society Series 294 (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1989), pp.66-78.
However, while the violence in the plays highlights the suffering of Christ in order to inspire devotion, at the same time it also fulfils another, more complicated purpose. As the previous chapters have shown, while the plays deal with historical Biblical events, their relevance to the spiritual lives of their audiences is emphasised by the treatment of these episodes as contemporary issues. In the same way, the brutality inflicted on Christ and authorised by his antagonists has reference to social and legal conventions prevalent in medieval England. The Crucifixion plays attempt to relate the violence of the crucifixion to the violence endemic in the Middle Ages in order to bring home to the audience their own involvement in the crucifixion of Christ.

In medieval England there were two reasons sanctioned in law for inflicting pain on a civilian. One was torture, defined by James Heath in *Torture and English Law*, as:

> the infliction of physically founded suffering or the threat immediately to inflict it, where such infliction or threat is intended to elicit, or such infliction is incidental to means adopted to elicit, matter of intelligence or forensic proof and the motive is one of military, civil, or ecclesiastical interest.¹

Indubitably the treatment meted out to Christ was a torment to him, but not in this strictly legal understanding of torture. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the time when the plays were written and performed, the legally authorised application of torture was limited to ecclesiastical inquisitions and

¹ Heath, *Torture and English Law*, p.3.
cases of high treason, where it was used to obtain confessions from reluctant testifiers. Anyone using torture outside these areas was liable to prosecution. Therefore, although in the Wakefield plays the men who administer the agonies of the crucifixion are known as ‘Primus Tortor’, ‘Secundus Tortor’, etc., Christ’s treatment at their hands is not recognised as torture in this sense, since they show no interest in extracting information from him. In a blasphemy trial such as the one in the plays of Christ before Annas and Caiaphas, the use of torture would have been an accepted method of obtaining the evidence necessary to convict the accused — in this case, a confession from Christ that he did indeed claim to be the Son of God. However, in this trial there is no need to torture him to obtain this statement, since he freely admits it as soon as they ask:

JESUS

As thou sayes, right soe say I.
I am Goddes Sonne almightye

(Chester 16/45-46)

In this case the buffeting he receives follows his declaration of divinity rather than precipitating it, so this treatment too is not strictly torture according to Heath’s definition.

An alternative justification for the violence dealt out to Christ may be that it was administered as a punishment. However, such punishments had to be handed down in strict accordance with

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5 Heath, Torture and English Law, p.45, and passim.
6 See Stevens and Cawley, eds., The Towneley Plays, Plays 21-25.
the law. Bracton’s famous thirteenth-century treatise on English jurisprudence decreed that ‘prisoners should not be subjected to painful measures except after lawful judicial sentence, and strictly in accordance therewith’. In the York play of the Crucifixion, the soldiers stress the fact that Christ’s punishment has been judicially imposed, by making the point that he is about to undergo the crucifixion because he has been found guilty as charged: ‘For alle his fare he schalle be flaied’ (York 35/44). While they are emphasising Christ’s guilt they are at the same time making it clear that their own actions are legitimate. In the Passion plays the imposition of violence as a penal measure appears to have a variable legal status. The buffeting sanctioned by Caiaphas and Annas is of questionable legality: in the York play of Christ before Annas and Caiaphas, Caiaphas would dearly love to have Jesus killed on the spot for his blasphemy, and is reluctantly persuaded by Annas to permit the buffeting as a quasi-legal interim sentence (York 29/384-389), while in the Chester play of the trials (The Fletchers, Bowiers, Cowpers, and Stringers Playe), Caiaphas does not engage in this legal quibble — the buffeting is his immediate rough justice (Chester 16/51-69). In contrast is Pilate’s formal judgment of Christ, which, particularly in the N-Town Passion, echoes the familiar cadences of judgments handed down in the medieval courts:

**Pylat:**

Jhesu, þin owyn pepyl han dysprevyd
Al þat I haue for þe seyd or mevyd.

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7 Bracton, De legibus, ff. 101b, 105a, cited in Heath, Torture and English Law, p.45.
Chapter 3: Doefully diste

I charge you all at the beginnyng,
As ye wole answere me beforne,
That no man xal tooch your kyng,
But yf he be knyght or jentylman born.

Fyrst his clothis xal of don
And maken hym nakyd for to be.
Bynde hym to a pelere, as sore as ye mon,
Pan skorge hym with qwripps that al men may se.

Whan he is betyn, crowne hym for your kyng,
And han to the cros xal hym bryng.

And on the crosse xal xalt be fest,
And on thee naylys by body xal rest:

On xal thorwe þi ryhte hand go,
Anothyr thorwe þi lyfte hand also;

þe thred xal be smet þour bothe þi feet,
Which nayl þerto be mad ful mete.

(N-town II / 678-690)*

Pilate’s judgment, with its scrupulous attention to detail, sets out the horrifying particulars of the punishment in order to safeguard the officials against future accusations of miscarriage of justice. In its callous formalism it is an indictment of contemporary processes of law; and at the same time it recalls Christ’s condemnation of the legalism of the Scribes and Pharisees, who gave more attention to weighing spices than to observing ‘the

vveightier things of the lavy, iudgement, and mercie, and faith' (Matthew 23:23).

The violence which occurred in the trial plays — the buffeting, scourging, and crowning with thorns — is escalated in the plays of the Crucifixion, as Christ moves closer to the heart of his mission. The events of the Crucifixion are treated in the Chester cycle by The Irenmongers Playe: The Crucifixion (Chester 16A), and by the York plays of The Road to Calvary (York 34); The Crucifixion (York 35); and The Death of Christ (York 36). In these plays the audience is shown a concomitant increase in Christ's suffering as the cruelty of the Crucifixion intensifies.

Pictures of the Crucifixion scene would have been familiar to the audience through the widespread dissemination of representations of the Passion, since, as Gertrud Schiller points out, the Crucifixion was 'at every period the central pictorial statement about Christ's Passion,' and research indicates that in late medieval England the image of the Crucifixion was featured in church paintings more often than any other Biblical episode. These illustrations were valuable teaching tools to inform people about the redemption but they were also useful to lay and religious people as aids to devotion. As Margaret Aston explains, 'A painting, sculpture of stained glass window was a document or holy text, making its conveyance simultaneously to God and man:

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10 Indicative of the popularity of Crucifixion scenes is the relative space devoted to this topic in E.W. Tristram's iconographic list, which cites even more locations than the Annunciation. Tristram, English Wall Painting, p.297.
it glorified the Creator and it instructed the created." In their staging of the violence and suffering of the Crucifixion the plays draw on these contemporary images from church art and popular iconography to emphasise the spiritual and personal significance of the Crucifixion to their audiences. This chapter will look at the relationship of the images of violence and suffering to the religious significance which the Crucifixion plays of Chester and York sought to impart.

Chester

Gurd on fast and make him goe,
this freake that ys our elders foe;
for all his wyles, from this woe
shall no man him warne.

(Chester 16A/9-12)

In the Irenmongers Playe (Play 16A) which dramatises the events of the Passion, the violence of the trials in the previous play is picked up in Cayphas’s opening exhortation to the Jews as they lead Christ to Calvary. From Christ’s journey on the road to Calvary until the deposition of his body from the Cross, the events of this play are chosen and designed to reinforce the Gospel

message of salvation and to teach an appropriate response to this message.

The intimate setting of the street productions lends itself to the incorporation of the audience into various scenes in the plays, so that like the characters in the plays they would have an opportunity to register a response to the violence inflicted on Christ and to his subsequent suffering. This is particularly true of the first part of the play, which deals with Christ bearing the cross on the road to Calvary. Of course it is impossible to reconstruct exactly the way this scene would have been played, but since at this time the Road to Calvary was increasingly popular as a subject for medieval art, it is possible to identify generic features of the pictures which were also likely to have been used in the staging of the scene. According to Gertrud Schiller, 'the scene of Christ carrying the cross was expanded into a great popular scene. There is no longer any distance between Christ and the crowd and he and the Women are treated with ever greater violence.' Looking at paintings of the Bearing of the Cross from the mid-fourteenth to the late fifteenth century, one is struck by the wide variety of characters represented on the canvas, with the expressions on the faces of the onlookers ranging from jeering and threatening to compassionate. It is as if the witnesses on the road to Calvary are representative of the whole of mankind, standing watch as the road to salvation is travelled on their behalf. On the evidence of these

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12 Schiller, Iconography of Christian Art, Vol. II., p.81.
13 See, for example, Plates 286-297 in Schiller, Iconography of Christian Art, Vol. II., and Hassall, ed., The Holkham Bible Picture Book, fol.31.
pictures one can argue that parts at least of Chester's 'Road to Calvary' sequence may have been staged at ground level, since a production staged in this way would involve and implicate the audience as witnesses to the bearing of the cross to Calvary, just like the crowds in contemporary paintings. However, recent attempts to stage cycle plays in an authentic manner have shown that in these circumstances only those closest to the action can see and hear it adequately. For this reason I suggest that key scenes during the Road to Calvary sequence, such as the conscription of Simon of Cyrene and Christ's address to the women of Jerusalem, would probably have been performed on the pageant-waggon to ensure adequate visibility and audibility, while repeated movement on and off the pageant-waggon between these scenes would create a sense of the journey travelled. Because in this part of the play the violence is still a prospect rather than a reality, the sense of journey contributes to a feeling of dread of the approaching crucifixion.

Other key scenes in this play which highlight the violence inflicted on Jesus — the dicing for Christ's robe, the nailing of Christ to the cross, and the miracle of Longinus — are much more likely to have been performed on the pageant waggon, since the necessity for making the action visible to the audience overrides the importance of incorporating the audience into the scenes. The sense of journey required for the play's first scene is dispensed with after the group arrives at Calvary, and once the characters are

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14 It is clear from the videos of the following productions that this difficulty needs further work: Jane Oakshott, *The York Mystery Plays* (1998), DVD. ; {Poculi Ludique
on the stage in these scenes, there is no necessity for them to move between the pageant waggon and the street.

The characters who interact with Christ on his journey to Calvary present a variety of attitudes and concerns regarding the aggression he meets. Ranging from the indifferent to the sympathetic, these figures foreshadow the coming violence of the Crucifixion in interesting and subtle ways. Simon is ‘of Surrey’, which in Chester marks him as a fellow Englishman but at the same time an outsider, and thus one whose support could be hoped for but not relied upon. At the same time his outsider status and his act of kindness (albeit reluctant) link him to the Good Samaritan. As a fellow bearer of the cross he is a type of Christ, but he bears the cross unwillingly where Christ bears it willingly, and his enforced participation in the crucifixion signals to the audience that nobody can choose to remain a bystander to the Crucifixion, that all are involved, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. As a surrogate for Christ he becomes subject to threats of violence which echo the violence inflicted on Christ:

CAYPAS

Symon, but thou will be shent
and suffer Payne and imprisonment,
this crosse upon thy backe thou hent
and lerr be all thy bost.

(Chester 16A/29-32)
Illustrations of this scene in books and wall paintings show the inherent aggression associated with this part of the Passion. In Folio 31 of *The Holkham Bible Picture Book*, for example, Simon is being seized by two men brandishing an axe and a club, while in the centre of the picture Christ, bearing the cross and bound around the middle by a rope, is being pushed and jostled by two other men who are holding the ends of the rope. As this picture reminds us, although there are no weapons specifically mentioned in the text of the play at this point, it is most probable that they were present as part of the stage properties, a potent visual indicator of violence.

Other characters who hasten to Christ's side are the women of Jerusalem, whom Christ warns of the violence they must expect:

**JESUS**

Yee weomen of Jerusalem,
weepe not for mee, ne make noe swem;
but for your owne barme-teame
ye mon reame tenderlye.
For tyme shall come, withowten were,
ye shall blesse ballye that never child bere
and pappe that never milke came nere,
so nygh ys your anoye.

(Chester 16A/57-64)

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15 E.W. Tristram has listed a number of paintings of Christ carrying the Cross in his catalogue of English wall paintings of the fourteenth century. These paintings were still in existence, although many were in poor condition, when Tristram compiled his catalogue in the first half of the twentieth century, so they (and many more which were later destroyed during the Reformation) would have been readily available to audiences of the mystery plays in the fifteenth century. Tristram, *English Wall Painting*, p. 297; see also the painting at Chalgrove, Oxfordshire in Plate 91.
In a performance of this play, as Christ spoke from the pageant waggon his warning would have been addressed both to the women in the play who lament his impending suffering, and also to the women of the audience. The warning would be valid at each level, for not only is violence promised to the women of Jerusalem in the play, but the women of Chester must fear the violence of the real Day of Judgement, when they too will 'blesse ballye that never child bere / and pappe that never milke came nere' (Chester 16A/62-63). This device is designed to bring the women of Chester into sympathy with the Virgin Mary and her companions, lamenting the imminent death of one who is a son and friend, and at the same time their Lord.

Christ’s antagonists all endorse or participate in the violence of the Crucifixion to some degree. Caiaphas in particular is the driving force in this play: exhorting, instructing and admonishing his subordinates to keep them to their task of carrying out the Crucifixion:

\begin{verbatim}
CAYPHAS

Nowe of this segger we binne sker.
Agaynst us boote he not to beker.
Though he flyre, flatter, and flycker
thys fiste shall he not flee.
\end{verbatim}

(Chester 16A/1-4)

A further preamble to the crucifixion in the Chester play is the dicing for the Christ’s seamless robe. Whereas in the other cycle plays and in conventional representations, Christ is shown as
already dead or dying on the Cross when the soldiers gamble for his garments, the Jews in the Irenmongers Playe dispose of Christ's clothes while he still needs them. Like terrorists since the world began, Christ's executioners inflict on their prisoner the emotional violence of humiliation and degradation before his eventual execution. Stripped of his clothing while his guards gamble for it, Christ is deprived of the warmth, modesty and status that clothing gives. Without his clothes, he is invisible to Primus Judeus and his fellows, and as he stands naked while they ignore him to conduct their game of dice, they have deprived him of not just his clothing but his importance. Even when he is finally noticed by Cayphas, it is only to be exposed to ridicule as 'peweears' (Chester 16A/150).

Since the most violent activity that takes place in the play is the nailing of Christ to the cross, a great deal of stage business is devoted to this process. In medieval art there were generally two methods used for this procedure. In many pictures of this scene in medieval European art the cross is standing upright, and Christ ascends the cross by a ladder.16 This seems to represent the earlier medieval perception of Christ as a warrior preparing to engage in battle on mankind's behalf. However, in the cycle plays, as in much English iconography of the period, the procedure is carried out with the cross lying on the ground, before it is raised to a vertical position and dropped into a mortise, emphasising Christ's position as sacrificial victim. In a performance of this scene, particularly in

16 Schiller, Iconography of Christian Art, p.86-88.; see Plates 303, 304.
the pageant-waggon plays of Chester and York, the audience standing in the street would have had a very limited view of Jesus in this prone position. They would have seen and heard the men who were engaged in nailing Christ to the cross, but they would have been unable to see Christ’s face or gauge his reactions to this brutality. However, since by the fifteenth-century there were many well-known paintings of the Crucifixion in churches and in popular bible picture books, most of the audience would have been able to draw on a familiarity with these illustrations to augment their appreciation of the action taking place on the stage. In the painted glass window at All Saints, Pavement, York, which shows Christ being nailed to the cross, the figure of Christ on the Cross is stretched diagonally across the picture, but this is meant to indicate that he is actually lying flat on the ground as the soldiers hammer nails into his hands and feet, while the picture of the nailing in The Holkham Bible Picture Book (Folio 31v), showing Christ stretched on the Cross at a gravity-defying angle to the ground, sacrifices perspective in the artist’s concern to transmit the horrid details of the nailing and stretching of Christ on the Cross. As the soldiers in the plays stretch Jesus to fit him to the pre-bored nail holes on the Cross, their commentary on the action provides information which, combined with the audience’s own

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17 E.W. Tristram notes that the Crucifixion and the Annunciation are most often found as single subjects rather than a part of a series, and as such they are more numerous than any other subjects. Tristram, English Wall Painting, p.21. By the fifteenth century the number of Crucifixion illustrations and paintings must have increased even further.

18 Illustrated in Clifford Davidson, From Creation to Doom: The York Cycle of Mystery Plays (New York: AMS Press, 1984), Plate 11.
recollections of Crucifixion pictures, would enable them to visualise the action on stage:

Drawes, for your fathers kynne,
while that I dryve yn
this ilke iron pynne
that I dare laye will last.

(Chester 16A/193-196)

The Jews are shown concentrating on the task in hand in an impersonal and business-like manner, and paying no attention to the suffering of their victim. Their chief interest appears to be a kind of odious self-congratulation on their handiwork:

QUARTUS JUDEUS

Fellowes, will you see
how I have stretched his knee?
Why praye ye not mee
that have so well done?

(Chester 16A/209-212)

In a neat piece of dramatic irony, the action of the Jews in vying for the most praiseworthy feat in nailing Christ to the cross achieves the opposite effect. Their boasting is designed to evoke in the audience pity for the victim and revulsion against his executioners' brutality.

The merits of the plays' method of fixing Christ to the cross become evident when the cross is raised, as the sudden revelation of Christ crucified is intended to achieve the maximum dramatic impact. To the audience who winced sympathetically as each nail that fixed him to the cross was driven in, he has now become a spectacle of suffering as he endures the drawn-out agony of dying.
by crucifixion. The movement and activity of the earlier part of the play converge into a centre of stillness and an object of contemplation.

Christ is on the cross for most of the second half of the play, so that during all the action that takes place on stage, he remains the focal point of the audience's attention. By providing the audience with a prolonged opportunity to view and reflect on the results of the violence that Christ has suffered, the plays follow a devotional practice that was widespread in late medieval popular piety, and endorsed by contemporary sermons. In these sermons preachers encouraged their congregations to envisage the wounds and injuries of the crucified Christ, exhorting them, as one preacher put it, to 'behold with their ghostly eyes the piteous Passion of Christ.' Religious persons would focus on the suffering at the Crucifixion in order to enter into a special sympathetic relationship with Christ; Margery Kempe, for example, recorded visions of Christ's crucifixion and her own reaction of repentance inspired by these visions:

...it was grawnred this creatur to beholdyn so verily his precyowes tendyr body — alto-rent and toryn wyth scorys, mor ful of wowndys than eyr was duffehows of holys, hangyn upon the cros wyth the corown of thorn upon hys hevyd, hys blysful handys, hys tendyr fete nayled to the hard tre, the reverys of blood flowyng owt plentevowsly of every membre, the gresly and grevows wownde in hys

Chapter 3: Docifuly right

precyows syde schedyng owt blood and waryr for hir lofe
and hir salvacyon — than sche fel down and cryed ...  

The visible re-enactment of the anguish of the Passion in
the mystery plays thus operated as a visual aid to spiritual
communion with Christ.

In the practice of affective piety, the devout would identify
themselves either with the Saviour in his trials and Crucifixion, or
else with the Virgin Mary in her sorrow for the agony and death of
her son. In this respect the mother of Christ and her female
companions, also called Mary, have two functions in the Chester
play. Firstly, as they utter their laments before the cross they
would provide a point of identification for the audience; the
extended treatment of their sorrow in the play gives the audience
an opportunity to contemplate the suffering attendant on the
Crucifixion. But their grief is not passive. Although they suffer
with Christ in his agony, they also question the need for his death.
The series of laments articulating these doubts comes to a peak of
despair in which Maria Jacobi invokes on herself the violence that
has been visited on Jesus:

Helpe me, Jesu, with some thinge
and out of this bitter bale me bringe
or elles slaye me for anythinge
and stynt me of this stryffe.

(Chester 16A/277-280)

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By metaphorically engaging in the violence suffered by Jesus, Maria Jacobi's prayer provides an outlet for the doubts of both the Marys and the audience. As Peter Travis has said, 'By raising these subliminal fears and then laying them to rest, Chester ameliorates the most potent doctrinal doubts which Christ's dying may evoke.'\(^1\) In the performance of this scene, Christ's position on the cross above the weeping Marys as they direct their questions to him places them in the position of suppliants and reinforces his status as lord.

The last instance of violence in the Chester play comes when Christ's side is pierced after his death. In John's Gospel the reason the soldiers pierce Christ's side is to make sure he is dead,\(^2\) but in the Irenmongers Playe, Ca'raphas orders this done in order to prove the Centurion wrong in his assertion that Jesus was 'Godes Sonne almightie' (Chester 16A/361):

**CAYPHAS**

Centurio, as God me speede,
\[\text{thou must be smutted; thou canst not read.}\]
\[\text{but when thou seest his hart bleede}\]
\[\text{lettes se what thou can saye.}\]

(Chester 16A/368-371)

The question of Christ's identity is finally answered by the healing of Longinus and his affirmation of faith, while the resulting humiliation for Ca'raphas would be very satisfying for the audience.

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\(^1\) Travis, *Dramatic Design*, p.186.

Chapter 3: Doctfully whyte

In the final act of violence in the Chester play, the earlier violence of threats, nails and doubts is united into an assurance of salvation.

York

IV MILES

Late dynge hym doune, han is he done
He schall nought dere vs with his dynne.

I MILES

He schall be sette and lerned sone,
With care to hym and all his kynne.

II MILES

Pe foulest ded of all
Shall he dye for his dedis.
(York 35/17-22)

The brutality of the soldiers who crucify Christ is just one aspect of the violence in the York Crucifixion plays. In the three plays of the York cycle which deal with the Crucifixion (York 34: The Shearmen's play, York 35: The Pinners' play, and York 36: The Butchers' play), the violence operates on several levels, both direct and indirect, both physical and emotional. The question of Christ's kingship which drives much of the action in the earlier Passion plays and provides a framework for their didactic message is also crucial to the plays of the Crucifixion. While he was welcomed as a king in the early plays of the Passion, the association with kingship counts against him in the Crucifixion plays, and much of the violence dealt out to Jesus in these three
Chapter 3: Deceitfully night

plays is related to this issue. Because he has been sentenced to death for treasonously claiming to be king, the soldiers use this charge as an excuse for additional violence against him. As the plays lead up to Christ’s violent death as a result of being called a king the audience is guided through a range of reactions to this claim, from derision to — ultimately — belief.

The association of the city of York with kingship which was discussed in Chapter One is of particular relevance with regard to the issue of legitimacy. York’s shifting fortunes in the Wars of the Roses, as the kings it supported rose and fell, made the subject of rightful kingship one of special interest to the people of York. Unsuccessful pretenders to the throne were executed,23 while successful pretenders disposed of their predecessors in an equally violent manner. Rumours about the death of Richard II would have left fifteenth-century audiences in no doubt of the violent fate awaiting an unwanted king.24 It is in this setting that Jesus is condemned to a traitor’s death for claiming to be king: ‘Pe foulest dede of all / Shalle he dye for his dedis’ (York 35/21–22); behind his violent death on the cross lurks the shadow of regicide.

23 For example, Perkin Warbeck, who declared his right to the throne in 1491, claiming to be Richard Duke of York, was executed for treason by Henry VII in 1499; see Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp.44–45.

24 Opinion among early chroniclers was divided as to how Richard II met his end, with most favouring starvation, whether voluntary or involuntary, while some thought that he was murdered by Sir Piers of Exton. However, by the end of the fifteenth century, most writers believed that Richard II was murdered by Sir Piers Exton on the orders of Henry IV; see Louisa Desaussure Duls, Richard II in the Early Chronicles (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp.169–182.
Chapter 3: Docthfully right

The themes of violence and kingship are tied together in the plays by the device of the crown of thorns: a powerful symbol for the amalgamation of kingship and suffering which Christ epitomises. As he begins to walk the road to Calvary in the Shearmen's play, the crown is still on his head, a striking reminder of the violence he has already endured. The crown's symbolic importance is underlined by the soldiers, whose version of preceding events completely ignores the violence they have already perpetrated against Christ, and focuses on the actions most significant to them: 'We haue been beside all his more / To clothe hym and to crone with throne, / As falls for a floe kyng' (York s4/26-28). In the plays, as in most Crucifixion iconography, the crown of thorns stays on the head of Christ even when his clothes have been removed. An illustration of this is the painted glass of the Crucifixion in York Minster Nave, showing Christ on the cross wearing a crown of thorns which looks more like a filigree circlet, and not very thorny at all. Since suffering is already represented in this painting by the crucifixion, it is the crown, signifying kingship, which is emphasised, rather than the thorns for suffering.

In the York plays another point of intersection between kingship and violence is identified in the cross itself. The timber for the cross has evidently been obtained from a Royal Forest, as the third soldier, Wymond, informs his fellow-soldiers that it has come 'Of þat laye ouere þe lake / — Men called it þe kyngis tree.' (York s4/64-65). In the laws of the Royal Forests, there were

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107 Illustrated in Davidson, From Creation to Doom, Plate 10.
stringent regulations against cutting the trees without a licence. By making it clear that this tree has been cut illegally, the play suggests that the use for which the tree is intended is also illegal, as the soldiers uneasily assure each other that 'For þat balke will no man vs blame / To cutte it for þe kyng.' (York 34/67-68). The cross is represented as a symbol of violence in two ways: Jesus first must carry it to Calvary, and then he must be crucified on it. However, on the 'kyngis tree', enduring the most degrading death dreamed up by the authorities, Jesus is still on the most royal cross of all:

And sen he claymeth kyngdome with croune,  
Even as a kyng here hange schall hee  
(York 35/79-80).

The violence in the three Crucifixion plays begins as memory, prospect and threat. Remembering the night of trials, the soldiers boast that Jesus has suffered sleep deprivation: 'He napped noght of all pis nyght' (York 34/19). Although this is not direct physical violence, since it is encompassed within the term 'physically founded suffering' it is still acknowledged as a measure of torture. He is wearing the crown of thorns, and his garments are splattered with blood from his scourging, and stick to his wounds where the blood has dried, as we are reminded when the soldiers strip him in preparation for the Crucifixion:

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27 Heath, Torture and English Law, p.3.

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Chapter 3: Doctfully eight

I MILES

All yf he called hymselffe a kyng
In his clothis he schall no3t hyng,
    But naked as a stone be stedde.

II MILES

That calle I accordand thyng —
But tille his sidis I trowe þeu clyng
    For blood þat he has bledde.
    Wheder þei clyng or cleue
    Naked he schalle be ledde.

(York 34/369-319)

The instruments of the Passion, the 'stalworthe steeles' and the 'hameres and nayles' (York 34/90, 92), are brandished throughout the action of the play, much like the instruments in the picture of the Road to Calvary The Holkham Bible Picture Book. In the crowd following Christ in this picture can be seen hammers, axes and spears, a promise of the violence to come, as the soldiers constantly remind each other: 'Hym bus be ded be none' (York 34/45).

Violence is threatened to all who come into contact with Christ. As in the Chester play, Simon experiences the threats of the soldiers as they coerce him into carrying the cross: 'Late dyng þis dastarde doun' suggests one soldier to his fellows (York 34/278), while another challenges Simon scornfully: 'What deuyll, whome schulde we drede?' (York 34/285). However, unlike Chester's play,

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the Shearmen's play of York shows Simon with a genuine reason for wanting to be elsewhere:

SYMON

    Goode sirs, ye may nouȝt be,
    For full grete haste haue I.

My wayes are lang and wyde,
And I may noȝt abide
For drede I come to late,
For suretye haue I hight
Must be fulfyllid þis nyght,
Or it will paire my state.

    Therfore sirs, by youre leue,
    Methynkith I dwelle full lang.
    Me were loth you for to greue —
    Goode sirs, ye late me gang.

(York 34/250-259)

Represented as a busy merchant like the Shearmen who presented this play, Simon's concern for his commercial enterprises and his disregard for the higher matters of politics or religion mark him as one of the ordinary characters with whom the audience could identify. As the stage representative of the merchant class of York, Simon is perhaps a more significant character than he at first appears. In his pragmatic acquiescence to the enforced involvement in the Crucifixion Simon avoids the violence he is threatened with, but by his action in carrying the cross he brings Christ closer to the violent death that awaits him at Calvary. He indicates to the audience that all are implicated, whether willingly or unwillingly.
The association of Christ with kingship — and the association of kingship with violence — is reinforced when the soldiers' name the mother and aunts of Jesus as queens, and drive the grieving women away from his side with violence and threats:

I MILES

Thare queenes with þer skymeryling and þer schoute
Wille noght þer stevenis steere.

II MILES

Go home casbalde, with þi clowte
Or be þat lorde we loue and loute,
þou schall abye full dere.

(York 34/191-195)

It was a familiar trope that the Virgin Mary's lament only served to increase the suffering of Jesus. However, his treatment at the hands of the knights after they send away the women gives a different perspective to this premise, since in this case Mary's grief not only increases his emotional suffering, but becomes the soldiers' pretext to exacerbate his physical suffering:

II MILES

Ther quenes vs comeres with þer clakke,
He schall be werued for þer sake,
With sorowe and with sore.

(York 34/210-212)

As well as the violence of the soldiers towards Jesus, the plays illuminate Jesus's own thoughts about violence. Initially, as

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29 Meredith, *The Passion Play from the N. Town Manuscript*, p.210, note to lines 855-858.
he progresses towards Calvary, he is concerned for the women of Jerusalem, rather than dwelling on his own imminent fate. His lament for the daughters of Jerusalem is a response to the Marys' grief, warning them of worse to come. In an interpretation that goes beyond that of in the passage in Luke's Gospel, he attributes responsibility for the coming violence specifically to God:

\[ \text{It is my father's will,} \\
\text{Alle fait is done and dighte.} \]

(York 34/178-179)

By claiming a familial relationship to God, Jesus identifies himself as divine. His declaration is immediately confirmed by the miraculous transference of the holy image onto III Maria's clout, as she wipes the face of Christ — a task traditionally appropriated to Veronica. However, by asserting that the future violence is God's will, Jesus implicates God in violence in a fashion reminiscent of the Old Testament. This makes the whole issue of violence in the York plays much more complicated than it is in Chester, as it shows God giving consent to violence in a way that Chester does not explore. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus cries out 'Elī, Elī, lamma-sabacthani? that is, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46). However, in the York plays...

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30 Luke 23:28-31. In this passage Jesus identifies the agents of the women's fate as 'they' — 31: 'For if in the greene wood they doe these things, in the drie what shal be done?'

31 In fact, the Ordo paginarum of 1415 lists the play as 'Ductio christi & ostensio Veronicæ' (The leading of Christ and the manifestation to Veronica), but by the time the manuscript of the plays was compiled in about 1477, the role of Veronica had been superseded by that of III Maria Johnston and Rogerson, eds., REED: York, p.26. For information on the dating of the manuscript see Beadle, ed., York Plays, p.10.
play of The Death of Christ, when Jesus cries out to God from the cross his complaint is more reproachful:

Heloy, heloy!
   My God, my God full free,
*Lama zabatanye,*
   Whereto forsoke þou me
   In care?
   And I did neuere ille
   þis dede for to go tille.
   But be it at þi wille.

(York 36/213-221).

In this way the York plays emphasise to their audience that the salvation that Jesus is working on is achieved at an emotional as well as a physical cost.

In comprehensive detail, the three York plays of the Crucifixion carefully show the violence inflicted on Jesus escalating from threats to action. Where the Jews in Chester's Irenmongers Playe performed their task with workmanlike practicality, in the Pinners play of York the Crucifixion is carried out with brutal enthusiasm, and the audience is shown the sadistic enjoyment of the soldiers in increasing the sufferings of Jesus. The soldiers comment on every stage in Christ's journey to Calvary; from his swoon while bearing the weight of the cross, and his pain as he is roughly stripped of the garments which still stick to his open wounds (York 29/313-319), to the fixing of Christ to the cross, the soldiers comment on each action of the crucifixion as they carry it out, reporting the stretching and hammering of Jesus in its full grisly details. By calling for the use of stage business giving prominence to the technicalities of the crucifixion, the play
Chapter 3: Docifully right

emphasises the pains that Jesus suffers, making the point that salvation was only achieved at a great cost. However, as he is in the Chester play, Christ would be nailed to the cross as it lies flat on the stage, with the result that the audience would be unable to see him during this process. Consequently, audience attention would be on the soldiers, making it is easy for them to be drawn into sympathy with the soldier's dilemma when they realise they have made the holes too far apart to fit Jesus. As Richard Beadle points out, it is only when the cross is raised and dropped into the mortise that they would realise 'they have been seduced into condoning the Crucifixion.'

The use of ropes and nails, which figures largely in the Crucifixion scenes, has a long and complicated history. The common perception in medieval iconography of the Crucifixion appears to be that nails were used to fasten Christ's hands to the Cross, and often a further nail, or sometimes two, to fasten his feet. The two thieves who were crucified with Christ, on the other hand, are very seldom nailed, and usually shown fastened to their crosses with ropes. In his article on 'The use of Nails in the Crucifixion,' James Hewitt shows that historically the use of ropes in crucifixions very probably predated the use of nails. Those who were crucified were tied onto their crosses with ropes to suffer a punishment that was slow, agonising and ultimately fatal, but

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34 Hewitt, "The Use of Nails in the Crucifixion," p.35.
curiously bloodless. However, as Ellen Ross explains, the whole thrust of the Christian message is that blood is a metonym for life and for that reason the shedding of blood is necessary for redemption. It was essential therefore, to reconcile these two strands of the Passion story. The story of Doubting Thomas in John's Gospel, which mentions the nail holes in Christ's hands, illustrates the point of intersection and validation for these two conflicting elements of the Biblical account. Consequently both ropes and nails are important in the staging of the Passion plays. Together they provide a pungent illustration of the Crucifixion as torture, as the body of Christ is stretched by ropes, as if on a rack, so that his hands can be aligned with the nail holes. The ropes and nails also fulfil a practical purpose in the staging of the plays, as M.D. Anderson points out: the ropes would hold the actor playing Christ in place while the cross was hoisted up, and the nails could be grasped by the actor to hold himself steady while the cross was manoeuvred into the mortise.

In staging the York play of the Crucifixion, the effect of the central part of the play must be largely achieved by the soldiers, as Jesus lies down on the cross during the fixing process, and thus is not well seen until the cross is raised. However, in the staging of the elevation of the cross, the York play makes two important

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36 'In art, sermons, and devotional literature, the blood flowing from the crucified Christ also signals life.' Ross, Grief of God, p.137.
37 See, for example, Leviticus 16:15 and 17:11, Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24, Ephesians 1:7, Revelation 1:7, and the whole of Hebrews.
38 John 20:25.
39 Anderson, Drama and Imagery, p.148.
points. When they lift up the cross with Jesus on it, the soldiers are subjected to pains similar to those they have just been inflicting on Christ. Like him, they too must carry the cross, and they find it almost too heavy to bear. As II Miles says:

My bourdeyne satte me wondir soor,
Vnto þr hill I myght noght laste.
(York 35/207-208)

There is a hint here that the weight of the cross is caused not just by the physical weight of the timber and the man, but by the immense spiritual weight of the sins of the world which Christ bears on the cross. Like Jesus on the cross, the knights feel their sinews stretched beyond bearing:

Pe deuill hym hang!
For-grete harme haue I hente,
My schuldir is in soundre.
(York 35/188-190)

Furthermore, the raising of Christ on the cross is the actual deed commemorated by the Eucharist, and so it is likely that as the soldiers lift the cross up high, their gestures are designed to recall the Elevation of the Host.

Once Christ is raised on the cross he becomes a spectacle of suffering, and there is a shift in focus from the infliction of his pain to watching him endure it. The play of *The Death of Christ* is one of the most iconographical of the plays, because there is relatively little action, so in this play perhaps more than any other, the focus of the play must be in the pictures made, to add force to the
speeches of Jesus from the cross. The 1988 production of this play in York on DVD shows how successful this approach can be. As one after another the characters speak to Jesus and he responds, the didactic message of the plays is reinforced by the stage pictures made as different configurations of characters gather around the cross. Reminiscent of popular iconography such as the pictures of the Crucifixion in the *Biblia Pauperum,* this scene offers the audience the opportunity to meditate on the suffering and death of Christ.

It is in these scenes where Christ is on the cross and the action is centred round the speeches to a much greater degree that the benefits of the use of poetry in the play-texts become apparent. Commentators have suggested that an advantage of poetry is that its rhythms make it easier for unlettered actors to memorise. A further bonus is demonstrated by the 1998 York production, where it is evident that the metre of the poetry lends itself to slow and clear enunciation which not only enhances the elegiac quality of the play, but in a street production where sound is easily lost, greatly increases the chances of being audible even to those at the back of the crowd. As Hans-Jürgen Diller points out in a discussion of the buffeting and scourging scenes of the mystery

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40 Oakshott, *York Mystery Plays.*
41 Henry, ed., *Biblia Pauperum,* Plates e and f.
42 Oakshott, *York Mystery Plays.*
plays, 'Under medieval acting and viewing conditions the audience had to be kept 'in the picture' by the speeches.'

The York plays also show Christ's interpretation of the Crucifixion, as he asks God to forgive his tormentors (York 35/49-60), then puts his words into actions by laying himself down on the cross (York 35/79). He calls on bystanders to witness his suffering, pleading with 'Al men þat walkis by way or strete' to repent (York 35/253-264), but it is not until after this that begins to explain his sacrificial salvific act to them:

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With bittirfull bale haue I bought,
þus, man, all þi miss for te mende.
On me for to looke lette þou noþt,
How bawnly my body I bende.
(York 36/183-186)
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The final act of violence towards Jesus takes place after his death, as Longinus is directed to thrust his spear into the side of Christ's body. This marks an end to all the brutality that has gone before by turning the cruelty into healing, as the blood of Christ restores Longinus's sight. The relative timing of the incidents of the centurion and Longinus are an interesting indicator of the dating of the two plays. In York, Longinus is healed first, and then the Centurion believes, but in Chester the centurion believes first, and then Longinus is healed. That is, in York, signs precede faith,

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but in the Chester play text, written in its present form well after the Reformation, faith precedes signs.

The subject of Christ’s claim to be king recurs when Annas and Caiaphas remind Pilate that one of the reasons Jesus is being crucified is his claim to be king. However, when Pilate arrives with his sign to go on the cross: ‘Jewes kyng am I’ (York 36/113), he effectively superimposes the truth over the high priests’ version of reality.

As the Crucifixion sequence began with the acquisition of king’s tree, so at the end of the three plays the tree’s work is done, but it is a king who comes down from the tree. As Joseph and Nicodemus effect the descent from the Cross, the true status of Jesus as king is finally acknowledged by Joseph: ‘To be, kyng, on knes here I knele’ (York 36/406).

Conclusion

The violence in the staging of the Crucifixion plays of Chester and York achieves a different effect in each play, largely dependent on the underlying didactic purpose of the play. The impersonal attitude of the Jews towards Jesus, particularly in the Chester play, is in sharp contrast to the emotional reactions of his friends, setting off the difference between his supporters and his antagonists in such a way as to make it very clear to the audience which direction they should choose. The stress on the kingship of Jesus reaches its climax at the lowest point of the story, where the dead body of Jesus is being lowered from the cross.
Chapter 3: Doe fully right

The dramatic realisation of the actions of the soldiers, torturers and Jews who carried out the crucifixion is intended to implicate the audience in this activity. Each cycle approaches the details of crucifixion from a different angle, and this largely relates to how it is dealt with by those who conduct the crucifixion. The violence in the three York plays is markedly more detailed and graphic than that of the Chester play. Whereas in Chester's Irenmongers Playe the violence of the crucifixion is justified as a juridical punishment and is administered by the Jews in a matter-of-fact and impersonal manner, in the York plays the soldiers appear to take a more personal interest in the crucifixion. The Chester Jews perform their duties with the practical efficiency of tradesmen who take a pride in their work, while the York soldiers bumble through the job with inept carelessness, and their commentary as they fix Jesus to the cross is more to encourage each other in a difficult job than from any kind of satisfaction in their skill. To the Chester group, Jesus is an object that they are working on rather than a person, and they make no comment on his suffering, whereas the soldiers in York enjoy the pain that Jesus is feeling as they stretch him on the cross, and observe with vicious pleasure the way his body reacts to their brutality. This difference in attitude seems designed to elicit a more personal and emotion involvement on the part of the York audience in the pains of Christ and an acknowledgement of their own responsibility in his death, whereas in the Chester Crucifixion the emphasis on the emotional suffering of the Marys and Christ's humiliation in the dicing scene seem intended to appeal to the intellectual understanding of their audience.
Although both Chester and York draw their material from the same source, the effect that is realised is very different. With just one play in a number of scenes, Chester's crucifixion comes together into a unified whole. The three York plays each have their own set of characters which creates an initial edge of displacement, but the three different plays all have a slightly different interpretation of the Crucifixion, with the result that the York production offers a rounded interpretation of three different facets of the Crucifixion.
The Crucifixion from The Holkham Bible Picture Book
Conclusion

Huske on his blis for to bide

CENTURIO

I knowe by manner of his crye
he hasse fulfilled the prophecye
and godhead shewed apertlye
in him, all men may knowe.

(Chester 16A/364-367)

The central purpose in the staging of the Passion sequences is not only to educate their audiences about the fundamental place of God in their lives, giving them 'holsom doctrine,' and to inspire them to 'gud deuocion,' but also 'for the Augmentacion & incresse of the holy and catholyk ffaith of our sauyour cryst Iesu,' the perception of God's action and response to the Crucifixion is an underlying pattern that runs through all the plays of the Passion sequences in both cycles. The staging of the cycles is

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geared towards the promulgation of the faith in a very simple and
effective way. Each of the plays, in one way or another, identifies
Jesus as God's son, so that even if the audience is unable to see all
the plays, they cannot miss this important message. This
identification comes sometimes through the mouths of friends and
disciples, as it does in Chester's Corvisors Playe, when one of the
citizens declares 'that hee is verey Goddes Sonne' (Chester
14/174), and sometimes through his antagonists, as they challenge
him to prove himself God's son, like Caiaphas in York's play of The
Death of Christ:

If you be sunne
To be Goddis sonne
We scall be bonne
To trowe on trewlye ilkone.
(York 36/101-104)

However, in most cases the identification comes from Jesus
himself. Sometimes he announces his identity to his friends, as he
does in the York play of the Entry into Jerusalem:

From heuen to erth whan I dyssende
Rawnsom to make I made promys,
The prophicie now drawes to ende,
My fadirs wille forsoth it is
Pat sente me hedyr.
(York 25/8-12)

On some occasions he declares his identity to his enemies,
as he does in Chester's Trial play of Chester, when Caiaphas's
question elicits more information than he wanted to know:
Conuction: Suske on hes bliss for to bide

As thou sayes, right soe saye I.
I am Goddes Sonne almightye,
and here I tell thee truelye
that me yet shall thou see
sytt on Goddes right hand him by
mankyn in clowdes to justefye.

(Chester 16/45-50)

Sometimes this information is imparted to the disciples as they see and hear Jesus praying to God the Father, for example in the Bakers Playe of Chester when Jesus prays to the Father as he consecrates the chalice at the Eucharist:

Father of heaven, I thanke thee
for all that eve thou doest to mee.
Brethren, takes this with hart free;
that is my blood
that shalbe shedd on the tree.

(Chester 15/97/101)

At other times the audience is privy to this knowledge that none of Christ's companions on the stage are aware of, as in the York play of The Agony in the Garden:

Pou fadir þat all formed hase with fode for to fill
I fele by my ferdnes my flessh wold full fayne
Be torned fro this turnement and takyn þe vntill,
For mased is manhed in mode and in mayne.
But if þou se sothly þat þi sone sill
Withouten surffette of synne þus sakles be slayne,
Be it worthy wroght even at thyne awne will.

(York 28/88-94)

In York's play of Christ before Pilate: the Dream of Pilate's Wife, Christ is identified as God's son by the Beadle who bows and
worships him because he has learned by the example of others that that is the right thing to do:

But firste shall I wirshippe \( \text{he} \) with witte and with will
This reuerence I do \( \text{he} \) forthy,
For wytes \( \text{hat} \) wer wiser \( \text{han I} \)
They worshipped \( \text{he} \) full holy on hy
And with solemniteit sang Osanna till.
(York 30/307-315)

The most dramatic recognition of Christ as God's son comes in York's second play of Christ before Pilate: The Judgement, when the banners bow to him in spite of all measures to prevent them. There is only one play in this sequence where there is no acknowledgement that Jesus is God's son, and that is in York's play of Christ Before Herod, when Jesus does not speak at all. The identification for the audience comes from his very silence. His refusal to answer any questions indicates that the wrong questions were asked, but his white garment is a potent signifier of his divinity.

In each cycle, it is the play where Christ identifies himself most explicitly that the centre of the cycle is found. In the Chester cycle, it is in the Bakers Playe of The Last Supper, when Jesus institutes the Eucharist and the foot-washing, as two different signs of his divinity, and explains to the disciples that:

Syckerlye, whoe seeth mee
Seeth my Father, I tell yt thee.
(Chester 15/221-222)
The emphasis in this play on Christ’s relationship with the Father, on his obedience and on his own divine attributes is an explicit manifestation of the didactic message of the Chester cycle as a whole, and especially the Passion sequence.

Father of heaven in majestie

glorifie, yt thy will bee,
ythy Sonne, that hee may glorifie thee,
nowe or I heathen wendi.
In yearth thou hast given me postie,
and I have donne with harte free
the worke that thou charged mee
and brought yt to an ende.

(Chester 15/265-272)

In the York cycle, the play that identifies Jesus most clearly is the Butchers’ play of *The Death of Christ*. In this play Christ shows not just his care for the souls of his fellow men, but the whole philosophy of sacrificial suffering that imbues the York plays, as he makes a last appeal to mankind from the cross:

Þou man þat of mys here has mente,
  'To me tente enterly þou take.
On roode am I ragged and rente
þou synfull saule, for thy sake;
For they misse amendis will I make.
  My bakke for to bende here I bide,
þis teene for thi trespase I take.
  Who couthe þe more kyndynes haue kydde
Than I?
þus for thy goode
I schedde my bloode
Manne, mende thy moode,
For full bittir þi blisse mon I by.

(York 36/118-130)
Conclusion: Buske on his blis for to bide

However, the reason this play is at the heart of the York cycle is not just that it elucidates Christ's saving death, but because it also demonstrates the appropriate audience response:

JOSEPH

jis lorde so goode
Pat schedde his bloode
He mende youre moode
And buske on his blis for to bide.

(York 36/413-416)
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