

# The Pilate of the York Mystery Plays

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The characterization of Pilate, one of the most complex figures in the Passion sequence of the Corpus Christi plays, has inspired few studies. Apart from Arnold Williams' book of 1950 on the Towneley Pilate<sup>1</sup> and Robert Brawer's 1972 article on the York Pilate,<sup>2</sup> this pivotal character is usually given perfunctory treatment by scholars of the English cycle plays.<sup>3</sup> Of the four cycles, York has generally been considered to have the least consistent Pilate figure. This may, however, not be the case. A close study shows that he always attempts to be fair and just to Christ despite the constant haranguing of the Jewish priests. When he exhibits anger it is usually directed at them because of their blatant lies and deceit. He is, on the other hand, also shown to have recognizably human failings which lead him, in the end, to resign authority to the Jews and, thereby, become a party to a deed against which his own instinct warns him. As its dire consequences unfold, his fear impels him to encourage the suppression of the truth. Thus his earlier, token agreement with the Jews is consolidated, and he is forced to become at one with them in responsibility for the Crucifixion. Though he shows a desire to see Jesus treated fairly, he is also proud, sensual, and self-seeking, and it is these latter qualities that lead him into error.

Pilate's characterization is the product of a long tradition which begins with the Gospels and culminates in the all-too-human figure who is representative of many well-meaning but weak men. This character comes to the medieval cycle plays from both Scripture and legend. There are certain things he must do in the course of the action which are dictated by the Biblical narratives. For medieval writers, the legends which had grown up around the Pilate figure were just as

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<sup>1</sup>Arnold Williams, *The Characterization of Pilate in the Towneley Plays* (Ann Arbor, 1950).

<sup>2</sup>Robert A. Brawer, 'The Characterization of Pilate in the York Cycle Play', *Studies in Philology*, 69 (1972), 289–303.

<sup>3</sup>For example, Lawrence M. Clopper, 'Tyrants and Villains: Characterization in the Passion Sequences of the English Cycle Plays', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 41 (March 1980), 3–20; Stanley J. Kahrl, *Traditions of Medieval English Drama* (London, 1974), pp. 91–97; V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, 1971), pp. 231–36; David Mills, 'Characterization in the English Mystery Cycles: A Critical Prologue', *Medieval English Theatre*, 5:1 (1983), 5–17; Sally Mussetter, 'The York Pilate and the Seven Deadly Sins', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 81 (1980), 57–64; Alicia Korzeniowska Nitecki, 'The Dramatic Impact of the Didactic Voice in the York Cycle of Mystery Plays', *Annuaire Mediaevale*, 21 (1981), 61–76; J. W. Robinson, 'The Art of the York Realist', *Medieval English Drama*, edited by Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago and London, 1972), pp. 230–44; Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London, 1972), pp. 244–53.

important as the scriptural accounts. From these legends two distinct traditions had emerged. In one, Pilate was treated sympathetically and his part in Christ's death was justified or, at least, mitigated. In the other, he was depicted as an evil man with a criminal past who met a just and horrible death.<sup>4</sup> The former of these legends is contained in the writings of several of the early Church Fathers and in some of the apocryphal accounts of the life of Christ.<sup>5</sup> It has influenced medieval drama, where most of the Pilates, if not always consistently 'good', are usually treated sympathetically and are rarely depicted as consistent villains.

In the alternative tradition, Pilate was believed to be the illegitimate son of a miller's daughter, a woman reputed to have lived by murder and fraud, who died a suicide.<sup>6</sup> This legend of the 'evil' Pilate was widespread and existed in several versions in the Middle Ages, for example in the *Legenda Aurea*. Though the York Pilate has more in common with the tradition of the 'good' Pilate, the other legend was clearly known to the playwrights of the cycle.<sup>7</sup>

Versions of Pilate found in the N-town, Chester, and Towneley plays show a variety of approaches. The N-town Pilate is depicted as completely just and fair.<sup>8</sup> In the Chester Cycle he appears in three plays, and to a certain extent two different aspects of Pilate are presented.<sup>9</sup> The first is in keeping with the tradition of the

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<sup>4</sup>The Death of Pilate' (*Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, edited by A. C. Cawley, London and New York, 1965, pp. 237–63), one of the plays of the The Cornish Trilogy, shows the medieval dramatists' awareness of this tradition. Here, Pilate is protected by Christ's robe (see the Towneley play *The Talents*) which gives him a fair seeming. When Tiberius Caesar insists he take it off, his evil becomes evident, and he is put into a dungeon, where he suicides. The Romans find it impossible to dispose of the body which both earth and water reject. Finally demons appear in a boat and carry it off to hell.

<sup>5</sup>A synopsis of the various apocrypha can be found in Williams, *The Characterization of Pilate in the Towneley Plays*, p. 3ff.

<sup>6</sup>For an account of this alternative legend, see Williams, *The Characterization of Pilate in the Towneley Plays*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup>The name 'Pilatus' is said to come from a combination of the names 'Pila' and 'Atus' (Pilate's alleged parents). In Play XXX of the York Cycle, *Christ before Pilate 1: The Dream of Pilate's Wife*, reference is made by Pilate to his parentage in the opening speech. However, he claims 'Sesar' as his father:

For sir Sesar was my sier and I sothely his sonne,  
That exelent emperour exaltid in hight  
Whylk all pis wilde worlde with wytes had wone,  
And my modir hight Pila pat proude was o plight;  
O Pila pat prowde, Atus hir fadir he hight.  
This 'Pila' was hadde into 'Atus' —  
Nowe renkis, rede yhe it right?  
For þus schortely I haue schewid you in sight  
Howe I am proude preued 'Pilatus'. (11. 10–18)

The edition cited is *The York Plays*, edited by Richard Beadle (London, 1982). All play and line numbers in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>8</sup>*Ludus Coventriae or The Plaie called Corpus Christi*, edited by K. S. Block, EETS, e.s. 120 (1922), 'The Passion Play II'.

<sup>9</sup>R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, EETS, s.s. 3 (1974), Plays XVI, XVII, and XVIII

'good' Pilate. His final words in Play XVI show sympathy for Christ and a sense of inevitability about the tragedy to follow: 'Take him to you nowe as I saye, / for save him I ney maye, / undonne but I would bee' (XVI. 368–70). The second, seen mainly in the Resurrection Play (XVIII) where he is both a ranter and boaster, adheres to the conventional tyrant mould.

The Pilate of the Towneley Cycle has been discussed in detail by Arnold Williams, who argues that, except for Christ, Pilate is made the most important person in the Passion and that a group of plays is constructed around him. Pilate, according to Williams, is, unusually, the motivating force behind the plot against Jesus in the Towneley play: 'into his creation is poured a full measure of the vitality so characteristic of the great Elizabethan villains' (p. xii). Rare, too, is the portrayal of Pilate as 'a consistent villain', but in Towneley, in Williams' view, he is a hypocrite and 'bad, all bad' (pp. 15 and 16) . . . 'the very type of the corrupt judge' (p. 37) who mirrors contemporary concepts of the legal profession and its members.<sup>10</sup>

Pilate appears in five Towneley plays, each of which opens with a traditional tyrant's rant.<sup>11</sup> In *The Conspiracy* he speaks of his fondness for 'fals indytars, / Quest mangers and Iurers, / And all this fals out rydars' (XX. 24–26), but also shows fear of Jesus: 'And yit I stand in fere / so wyde he wyrkys vertus, / No fawt can on hym bere / no lyfand leyde tyll us' (XX. 39–40). In *The Scourging* he reveals himself as a hypocrite:

I shall fownde to be his freynd vtward, in certayn,  
And shew hym fare cowntenance and wordys of vanyte;  
Bot or this day at nyght on crosse shall he be slayn,  
Thus agayns hym in my hart I bere great enmyte  
fful sore. (XXII. 31–35)

Williams argues that these lines make possible 'the reconciliation of the concept of Pilate as the chief villain of the Passion with the actions and attitudes with which Scripture invests him' (pp. 62–63). However, it is only by recalling the ironic framework established in *The Scourging* that the spectator or reader can remain

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<sup>10</sup>Williams points out that in almost every year from 1350–1450 records show that there was evidence of corruption amongst judges, juries and officials. He calls the identifying of the Towneley Pilate with the Law 'a stroke of genius', which makes him 'the first great tragic villain in the modern theatre', and the examining and judging of Jesus 'one of the finest pictures of a rigged trial in English Literature' (pp. 51 and 64).

<sup>11</sup>George England and Alfred W. Pollard, *The Towneley Plays*, EETS, e.s. 71 (1966), Plays XX, XXII, XXIII, XXIV, and XXVI.

aware of Pilate's hypocrisy. His later speeches in Towneley's *The Crucifixion* and *The Talents* are very like those of other Pilates, especially in the York cycle.<sup>12</sup>

The final Pilate play in both Towneley and York is the Resurrection play, and the two have much in common. Lines 45–213 and 496–555 in Towneley are so similar to York 37–186 and 353–430 as to indicate a common original. The Pilates of these plays are so anxious to keep the news of the Resurrection secret that they buy the silence of the soldiers guarding the body. Though there are some differences between the two, the Pilate of the Towneley play does not appear to be a hypocrite, nor does he refer to his intention to betray Jesus by a pretence of friendship. Despite Williams' lengthy exposition, if it were not for those crucial lines in *The Scourging*, the Towneley Pilate would appear to have much in common with the Pilate of the York Cycle, but, of course, with only the text to go by, we cannot tell what traditions of playing the Towneley Pilate may have been established.

In York, Pilate first appears in *The Conspiracy*. He begins by boasting of his power, wisdom, and beauty and threatening dire consequences for disobedience, a conventional tyrant's speech. His great personal vanity is thus established at the initial stage of the Passion sequence. This predominant dimension of the character has much importance for the future action and for the fluctuations of Pilate's attitude to Jesus and his accusers. At the outset, Pilate shows he understands the motives of Caiaphas and Annas quite clearly: 'I here wele 3e hate hym' (XXVI. 35) and warns them against anger, which may mar their reasoning. If Jesus 'haue wrought any wrong' (XXVI. 43), he assures them, he will be punished, but if 'his sawe be lawfull' (XXVI. 45) he will be freed, 'For we schall leue [spare] hym, if us list [if it please us], with luffe [in peace] here to lende [dwell]' (XXVI. 46).

The parenthetic 'if us list' in this line has a multiple emphasis. It re-asserts Pilate's boast that they are ruled by his choices and is indicative of the 'free will' God has granted mankind. Pilate can, if he 'list', save Christ. The choice is as much his as it is that of Annas or Caiaphas, though, in the event, he allows them to sway him. The audience, with its superior knowledge, recognizes the irony of the comment, aware that Pilate will inevitably follow a prescribed path, but sees, too, that on the actual historical occasion Pilate might have chosen differently. Conversely, the words 'if us list' have a hollow ring. If Christ's death were pre-ordained, Pilate is merely an instrument of God's plan and, as such, has no choice

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<sup>12</sup>In *The Talents* there is a bedding scene (ll. 65–72) somewhat reminiscent of the one in York (Play XXX, *Christ before Pilate 1: The Dream of Pilate's Wife*, ll. 136–48). When the torturers bring Jesus' coat, Pilate is awakened and participates in the dicing for it, but loses. Nevertheless, he forces the winner to give it to him. This is a trick worthy of the York Pilate, who cheats the Squire of his land in Play XXII, *The Remorse of Judas*.

but to pursue the course designed for him. It would be too much to argue that all the possible connotations are in the spectator's mind. Nevertheless, the various levels of understanding may be seen as tacitly present to a contemporary audience which was intimately familiar with the Passion story and plays, and with traditional interpretations of them.

As *The Conspiracy* proceeds, Pilate maintains his initial attitude of fairmindedness. He reminds the Jewish priests of their own prophecies, which Christ seems to fulfil: 'But þat hymselfe is þe same 3e saide schulde descende, / 3oure seede and 3ou þen all for to socoure' (XXVI. 57–58). Again, he accuses them of a predetermined wish to find Jesus guilty regardless of the facts, but, as he reiterates, the law is in his hands, not theirs. He asks Caiaphas to specify the punishment he wants, thus bringing into the open at this early stage the possibility of death and heralding the real beginning of the Passion. If, then, they want Christ executed, Pilate counsels them to put their case reasonably and without anger. When the priests and soldiers explain their grievances, that amongst other things Christ claims the temple is 'þe toure of his troned sire' (XXVI. 86), Pilate exclaims that surely only a madman would meddle with the affairs of the priests and that, after all, what they 'ymagyn amys' (XXVI. 92) is perhaps the result of their settled rancour. He calls them 'ouer cruell' (XXVI. 95) in their designs and, when they continue in the same importunate vein, tells them firmly that they gain nothing by groundless accusation. They must present their case properly and calmly, 'Withoutyn any tryfils [lies] to telle' (XXVI. 108); they must get proper evidence, 'And þan may we prophite oure pele [advance our formal accusation]' (XXVI. 110).

This latter line with its *we* and *oure* is more inclusive than anything Pilate has yet said and seems both to align him with the Jews and to give to his warnings of temperance a suggestion of advice on the successful prosecution of the case. Throughout, Pilate, while almost always attempting to treat Jesus fairly, never really alienates himself from the Jews. It is more often the conflict he feels between their wishes and the dictates of Roman law that spurs him to anger than any real antipathy to Christ. When the accusers say Jesus 'callis hym oure kyng' (XXVI. 115), Pilate sees that there is perhaps a case for treason against the person of the Emperor. This moves him to stronger language and more definite threats of punishment. It is, however, interesting that he prefaces the remarks with 'if so be' (XXVI. 117), an indication that the charge has yet to be proved. His initial reaction is to say that he will make 'þat knave' kneel (XXVI. 124), an action which will be seen as acknowledging both Pilate's and Caesar's authority and will make Jesus' claims to kingship seem hollow.

The part Judas will play in Christ's condemnation unfolds when Pilate questions him. As in the beginning of the play, where his words lead to the

introduction of each important aspect of the Passion (Christ's claims, the accusations, the Jews' implacable hatred, and the motif of death), so in this section, Pilate is the vehicle through which the necessary details of the drama are revealed. He does not participate when Judas and the accusers work out the details of the plan to take Jesus, and once more he is seen to stand aside from any direct action, though he gives Judas his blessing when the deal is concluded and sees that he is paid. The Jewish priests are keen to take Jesus as soon and as savagely as possible, but Pilate, in keeping with the role he has played so far, cautions them to show restraint.

In *Christ before Pilate 1: The Dream of Pilate's Wife* (York Play XXX), Pilate's first words are threats and boasts. As in the previous play, Pilate is obsessed with pride in his power, high standing, and personal beauty. The speech ends as his wife 'so semely' enters and bolsters his egotistical claims (XXX. 27–45). The following scene, though humorously sensual, establishes their relationship as good-humoured and affectionate. It shows her, too, as a personality of some strength, defensive of what she sees as her rights. Later, when her dream shocks her into intervening, her ability to impress Pilate is more readily understandable (if indeed this does change his mind) because her influence over him has been firmly established.

The bedding scene,<sup>13</sup> which follows Procula's exit in this play, emphasizes Pilate's sensual and rather precious attention to his body and stresses his personal pride. When his sleep is interrupted by the importunate priests and the soldiers who have detained Jesus, he is furious. His speech, somewhat in the ranting mode, is harshly alliterative, angry and threatening, but it is also humorous.<sup>14</sup> His directions to the Beadle are to beat the miscreants, put them in prison and, having done this, to find out who they are and what news they bring. The order in which he issues his instructions has something of a slapstick quality: beat, imprison, then ask who they are and what they want. At this point, Pilate's son brings news of Procula's dream. The actual dream scene (XXX. 158–92) precedes the entry of the priests and soldiers and is thus interwoven with the subsequent action. Annas and Caiaphas attribute it to Jesus' *wicheckraft* (XXX. 293). Aware of their evil intentions, Pilate says he will undertake the questioning. The Beadle is sent to bring the prisoner in and scandalizes the assembled group by bowing to him, but Pilate cautions calmness (XXX. 329). On examination, the Beadle explains that he saw Jesus earlier when the people cried 'Hosanna' to him. During this scene, Pilate shows annoyance only with Annas and Caiaphas, whom he tells to be silent while he puts his questions.

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. Towneley *Talents* Play.

<sup>14</sup>This sequence may equally well be attributed to the 'realist' aspects of the play, *i.e.*, Pilate is still befuddled by sleep and is, thus, somewhat illogical. Realism in these plays is discussed by J. W. Robinson, in 'The Art of the York Realist' (see note 3).

Pilate makes a formal speech ordering 'pece in this prese' (XXX. 372) and calling Jesus forward. This marks the beginning of the interrogation, which will lead ultimately to the Crucifixion and, once again, Pilate has the speech that introduces the next important phase of the Passion. When the priests continue to abuse Jesus, Pilate welcomes and encourages him and calls on the Jews to state their case. Unconvinced by their argument, he returns to his theme: 'What cause can ye fynde nowe þis freke [person] for to felle [overthrow]?' (XXX. 417). He believes that, under their own law, they can punish malefactors by scourging or death, but Caiaphas denies this (XXX. 431–32). Pilate shows his anger with the priests and his pity for Jesus when he continues to maintain that he can see no reason to condemn an innocent man:

What wolde ye I did þanne? Þe deuyll moue you drawe!  
 Full fewe are his frendis but fele are his foes.  
 His liff for to lose þare longes no lawe,  
 Nor no cause can I kyndely contryue  
 Þat why he schulde lose þus his liffe. (XXX. 433–37)

The priests reiterate their accusations and demand that Jesus be sentenced to death. Do they, then, expect him to convict a man for doing good, Pilate asks them. He wonders where they learned 'such lawe' (XXX. 453). However, on hearing of Christ's claims to a kingdom and of his advice to the people not to pay tribute, Pilate agrees that, if this is true, he deserves death. Nevertheless, he wants to hear for himself what Jesus has to say, and in reasonable and calm language questions him, advising him to speak in answer to the charges and asking whether, in fact, he is God's son. It seems to Pilate that Jesus speaks the truth but that Annas is lying (XXX. 491–92). His anger is consistently directed at the Jews, while his tone and attitude to Jesus remain sympathetic.

*The Remorse of Judas* (York Play XXXII) marks something of a change in Pilate's characterization.<sup>15</sup> For the first time his anger is directed at Jesus who, it is important to note, is not present when it occurs. Pilate opens the play with a characteristic tyrant's harangue which, though it contains some threat, mainly emphasizes his pride of power, prestige, and personal beauty. A marked change in Pilate's language occurs when he hears that Jesus has said he will *deme* them the day after they die. In setting himself up as a judge, Jesus strikes at Pilate's pride in his own power and he exclaims, 'To deme vs, in þe deuyll name!' (XXXII. 88). Pilate describes the claim to be able to rebuild the temple in three days as 'darke

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<sup>15</sup>The question of authorship arises, and it may be that the change is due to the fact that a different dramatist was responsible for this play. This is a vexed and complex question, needing more space than presently available and worthy of separate treatment.

dedis of þe deuyll' (XXXII. 99) and is completely enraged when he hears that Jesus 'callis hymselfe oure comeliest kyng' (XXXII. 103). The priests use this time alone with Pilate to inflame him by attacking his most vulnerable point, his pride. The language associated with his anger is heavily alliterated, the reiterative sounds giving emphasis to the expression of his motivation. Pilate's son eventually has to remind him that, as he has sent Jesus to Herod for judgment, he must now await the outcome of that action (XXXII. 116–23). Somewhat mollified, Pilate calls for wine, following which Judas enters lamenting his deed against his master. When asked for news, Judas offers them the blood money in return for Christ's release, but Pilate refuses, saying, 'When þou vs sought þou was full fayne / Of þis money. What aylys þe nowe / For to repente?' (XXXII. 204–06). He goes on to show his disgust with Judas' treachery and with his offer to serve Pilate in return for Christ's freedom. Throughout, Pilate shows no sympathy for Judas, whom he constantly curses and mocks, in contrast to his treatment of Jesus. By his own actions Judas has condemned himself and deserves no sympathy, but Jesus has yet to be proven guilty of any crime and, at least when he is present, Pilate preserves an open mind.

When Judas has thrown down the money and departed, Pilate and the two priests decide that, being the price of blood (XXXII. 328–30), it cannot go into the treasury. Pilate decides to buy land for a pilgrims' burying ground (XXXII. 333–35). An Armiger appears who has land to *wedde-sette* [mortgage] (XXXII. 351) for 'xxx<sup>ti</sup> pens' (XXXII. 354). Pilate asks to see the title to the land, on the receipt of which he hands over the money but keeps the deeds, thereby cheating the Squire of his property. Despite this action, Pilate insists that, 'þis place is purchased full proprily' (XXXII. 369) and he names it the 'Felde of Bloode' (XXXII. 370).

This play shows two new aspects of Pilate's personality. The first is his anger against Christ, the second is blatant dishonesty. These factors complicate the picture of a fair and just Pilate. There can be no simple explanation. However, of all the people involved in the Passion, Pilate most approximates in attitude the man who, wanting to believe in Christ and to do good, is yet drawn to the material things of the world. The attributes that create a 'worldly' character are his pride, his sensuality, his angry outbursts, and his cheating of the Squire. There is a further dramatic dimension to Play XXXII which might be seen to account for its different approach to Pilate. As the Passion nears its climax, the playwright may have felt compelled to show the strength and determination of the forces closing in against Jesus. To this end, Pilate is given language of a type more usually associated with Annas and Caiaphas. For the first and only time he describes Jesus as a *warlowe* [scoundrel] (XXXII. 384) and a *doderon* [wretch] (XXXII. 385), strongly antagonistic and pejorative words intended, it would seem, to emphasize a dramatic moment.

The following York play (*Christ before Pilate 2: The Judgment*, XXXIII) sees a return to the earlier characterization. There is the usual opening speech, though on this occasion more threatening than boastful. It is a reminder of the power Pilate believes he has over all present and has an ironic dimension for the all-knowing audience, who are in possession of the future facts and see that he follows a path predetermined by God. When Jesus is brought in by the soldiers, Pilate proudly receives the greetings sent to him from Herod. This serves to show the consolidation of those who have worldly power, the power turned against Jesus. Pilate points out that Herod has treated the prisoner kindly and, like Pilate, has found no fault in him that deserves death (XXXIII. 74–80). On hearing the charge that Jesus has been advising the people not to pay tribute to Caesar, Pilate says that if he is proved guilty, he will be condemned regardless of any shameful consequences (XXXIII. 105). Pilate, who suspects the priests will bring forward false witnesses (XXXIII. 120–23), constantly cautions the Jews to leave off their accusations, to change their argument, and to take care what they say and how they say it. He is adamant that Jesus should be proved to have some evil intention worthy of death.

Suddenly the priests cry out and point to the banners: 'thez baneres to this brothell [wretch] þai bowde all on brede [on every side]' (XXXIII. 169).<sup>16</sup> Pilate is initially inclined not to believe them but is finally persuaded. He speaks angrily to the soldiers, whom he holds at fault, cursing them in the devil's name, calling them liars and scoundrels (XXXIII. 172–79), and threatening them with shameful death. One of them can stir himself and go into the town, bidding the biggest and strongest men to come to Pilate (XXXIII. 210–15). These men are given their orders to hold the banners firmly and warned that they will be carefully watched to see no tricks are played (XXXIII. 252). Jesus is called and, to Pilate's amazement, despite the strength of the men, the banners bow. At the same moment Pilate himself, springing involuntarily to his feet, is unable to resist worshipping Jesus. When Caiaphas expresses surprise, Pilate says it was an action beyond his control, though it brought him pain (XXXIII. 268–79). Pilate is thus marked as one of the people who might be reached by Christ, and, therefore, distinguished from the other participants in the Crucifixion. His initial reaction is to free Jesus, whom he now fears and of whom he knows nothing that merits conviction. He questions Jesus once more, asking if he knows of what he is accused. At last he tells the priests to judge for themselves. He can see no reason to condemn one who does not deserve it. He has heard why the Jews hate Jesus but, for himself, he can find no fault in

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<sup>16</sup>The episode of the bowing banners follows the Middle English metrical version of *The Gospel of Nicodemus* (W. A. Craigie, 'The Gospel of Nicodemus and the York Mystery Plays', in *An English Miscellany Presented to Dr Furnivall*, Oxford, 1901, p. 56).

him and, as far as he is concerned, Jesus may go free (XXXIII. 281–327). However, Pilate delivers him to be scourged for his treasonable claim to kingship. After the scourging, he recalls Jesus to see how he has suffered, expecting the prisoner to withdraw his claims and presenting him to the Jews as punished. At this point there is a break in the manuscript where a leaf is missing. This is followed by the lines in which Pilate refers to 'pis process' (XXXIII. 440) (*i.e.*, the hand washing) by which he will show that he has nothing to do with condemning Christ.<sup>17</sup> After the hand washing scene, Pilate frees Barabbas and orders Jesus to be crucified on Calvary with a *harlott* [rascal] on either side of him.

At no point in this play does Pilate show anger or vindictiveness towards Christ. When he loses his temper at the bowing of the banners, it is against the soldiers that his chagrin is directed. Finally, torn between the incessant arguing of the Jews and his own inclination to free Christ, Pilate attempts to deny any complicity by placing the matter in the priests' hands. This, as he well knows, is tantamount to a death sentence, and his words of condemnation show he is aware of that fact. Pilate is absent from the scenes dramatizing the scourging, but those torments are the direct result of his actions and no hand washing can absolve him from them.

In *The Death of Christ* (York Play XXXVI), in his opening speech, Pilate boasts of his position and power and points to the two crucified thieves as evidence of it. Then he turns to Jesus saying that his death is an *unhappe* (XXXVI. 33), a misfortune, and that the Jews have done it for spite (XXXVI. 33–39). The priests attempt to argue, but Pilate insists he examined Jesus according to law and still considers him innocent and that his blood is on their heads, not his (XXXVI. 48–52, 66–69).

Following Christ's call, 'Heloy! Heloy!' (XXXVI. 213), Caiaphas suggests he is calling on *Heely* (XXXVI. 227) (*viz.*, Elias) to help him. Pilate says, 'If he do soo / He schall haue woo' (XXXVI. 231–32). This is merely a statement of fact, not an angry outburst, and Pilate does not speak again for some time. His next action is to agree to the burying of the bodies before the Sabbath, to which end the soldiers are shown stabbing the thieves to make sure they are dead. Pilate's admonition to them, 'Deluere, haue done þei were dede' (XXXVI. 288), implies a certain brutality in the gestures of the soldiers and may also suggest irritation on his part. Blind Longeus is ordered to stab Jesus in the side. In doing so, blood splashes on his face and he receives his sight (XXXVI. 291–312). The appropriateness of assigning

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<sup>17</sup>The stage direction *tunc lavat manus suas* has been added later against line 442. In Play XXXVII, at the point where Jesus washes the disciples' feet, the stage direction *tunc lavat manus* appears in the margin. The *manus* here is an error for *pedes*. It may have resulted from the annotator's recollection of the later 'washing' scene.

this action to a knight, Sir Longeus, may relate to medieval habits of mind regarding the idea expressed in the N-town cycle where Pilate directs: 'þat þer be no man xal towch þour kyng / but yf he be knyght or jentylman born'.<sup>18</sup> In the York play, following the miraculous restoration of Longeus' sight, Joseph of Arimathea requests the body, and Pilate both welcomes him and grants his request, the only proviso being that he bury it before the Sabbath begins (XXXVI. 331–42). Pilate continues to emphasize his belief in Jesus' innocence.

In *The Resurrection* (Play XXXVIII), Pilate appears for the last time in the York Cycle. He opens on a quieter note than usual, calling on the priests to remember that it was by their joint assent that Jesus was put to death. Though Annas advises him to say no more about it, Pilate is troubled because they have heard nothing since Jesus was buried. Caiaphas sends for the Centurion who, when questioned, answers, 'I drede me þat Ʒe haue done wrang / And wondir ill' (XXXVIII. 59–60). Pilate tells the Centurion not to criticize their actions and to remember that if a witness is needed to excuse the deed, he should be prepared to speak for them (XXXVIII. 67–72). When the Centurion recounts the marvels that occurred at Christ's death, Pilate warns him to take care what he says. Such sights, he points out, are only natural eclipses; spreading stories of this kind will be harmful (XXXVIII. 98–101, 113–14). Nevertheless, Pilate is puzzled by the unprecedented wonders and agrees a guard should be set at the tomb. To this end he chooses the best knights, warning them to take great care of the body until the third day, for if it should disappear, they will die (XXXVIII. 163–74). When they discover it has gone, it is Pilate's wrath they fear. However, they are forced to acknowledge that they must reveal what has happened and return with the news. On hearing it, Pilate calls them false and cowardly and, in a scene reminiscent of the strong men and the banners episode, accuses them of letting Jesus go, which they deny (XXXVIII. 379). Pilate asks if Jesus rose 'by hymselfe allone' (XXXVIII. 381), and they answer, 'Ʒa sir, þat be ye traste' (XXXVIII. 382). He then reminds Caiaphas that if a mistake has been made they must fail together (XXXVIII. 396–400), and they agree to bribe the soldiers to suppress the truth. They are told to say that ten thousand men forced them to give up the body (XXXVIII. 421–24), showing, in the extravagance of the story, Pilate's and the priests' panic. The soldiers are promised £1,000 and the continued support of the state if they will do as they are asked (XXXVIII. 425–30, 437–46). Pilate sums up the action with the words: 'Thus schall þe sothe be bought

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<sup>18</sup>Block, *Ludus Coventriae or The Plaie called Corpus Christi*, p. 294, 'The Passion Play II', ll. 656–57; cf. *The Northern Passion: Four Parallel Texts and the French Original, with Specimens of Additional Manuscripts*, edited by Frances A. Foster, EETS, o.s. 145 (1913; reprinted, 1971), pp. 220–223, ll. 1865–80b, and Wilhelm Heuser and Frances A. Foster, *The Northern Passion* (Supplement), EETS, o.s. 183 (1930; reprinted, 1971), p. 131, ll. 3149–64.

and solde / And treasoune schall for trewthe be told' (XXXVIII. 449–50). In the play as a whole, the dramatist frequently uses forms of language associated with the law, calculated to evoke strong feelings of fear, unease, and contempt for the corrupt and arbitrary offices of the contemporary legal system. This attitude is crystallized in these words which are a comment on the whole action of the Passion as well as on Pilate's own part in it. It is a comment, too, on mankind and its weakness in the face of truths it would rather not acknowledge. This is the very 'man', of whom Pilate is a central example, that Jesus came to save.

Pilate, in his 'tyrant' speeches, often mirrors the rhetoric of more clearly 'evil' characters, such as Herod the Great, the devil, and Caiaphas. Along with this, however, he shows a dawning recognition of Christ's power and identity, so that he can be aligned with characters like the Centurion. Thus, Pilate may be seen as a connecting figure in the plays who, while professionally belonging to one camp, feels emotionally drawn to the other, caught in the dilemma of the man who finds he cannot leave all and follow Christ, though he senses the great loss he will sustain.

In the York Resurrection play, Pilate appears to be at one with the Jews in the plot to suppress the news of Jesus' rising from the dead, but his words and actions are those of a man who suspects he has committed a grave error. It seems, too, he senses that the consequences of his actions are so momentous as to be better left unacknowledged, even to himself. Once admitting the Resurrection, he must then believe in Christ's identity as the Son of God and come face to face with the full horror of what he has allowed to happen.

The York Pilate has been described as weak, inconsistent, and vacillating. Arnold Williams, for example, says he shows, on the one hand, 'naïveté and sincerity' and, on the other, 'cynical selfishness' (p. 29). He finds him 'inconsistent', especially in the Resurrection play, where he is depicted in the same terms (since the plays are virtually identical) as the Towneley Pilate. It is by reference to only one speech in Towneley *Scourging* (XXII. 31–35) that the Pilate of that cycle can be seen as a hypocritical villain. In terms of dramatic unity, the argument for consistency seems more strongly in favour of the York Pilate, who, whatever else he may do, always preserves a propensity to fairness towards Christ.<sup>4</sup> In Towneley, however, it is possible that only one actor was used to play Pilate, that, in fact, the plays were performed at a fixed site and did not, therefore, have separate casts for each play, as was the practice at York. This would facilitate the sustaining of an evil Pilate figure. Having delivered the definitive speech in Play XXII, an actor could then emphasize the character's hypocrisy through gesture, tone, and expression.

Robert Brawer speaks of the York Pilate's 'apparently irreconcilable characteristics' and suggests these would be minimized if each play were treated as a

separate entity (pp. 289–90). A close reading of Pilate's part in the plays, however, shows that, far from changing from play to play, a consistent picture appears of a man aware of, and eager to do, what is right but constantly battling against conflicting forces which attempt to compel him to deny his instinct. It is a picture, too, of a man, who, with these contradictory impulses, combines ordinary human weaknesses which complicate and alter the path he knows he should follow. Sally Mussetter sees the York Pilate in the same terms as Williams sees the Towneley Pilate, 'a hypocrite who temporarily disguises his basically evil nature behind the mask of the "good" Pilate'.<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to discover any evidence in the plays for this argument. No speech is assigned to Pilate in the York cycle, corresponding to that in Towneley, in which he reveals a settled plan to play the hypocrite.

In contrast to these scholars, V. A. Kolve describes Pilate as 'potentially the most complex figure in the Scriptural account of the Passion'.<sup>20</sup> He considers that the disparate aspects of Pilate's character in York make for more realism and dramatic force than does the 'bad, all bad' character in Towneley. In his view, this York Pilate and Procula's warning dream point up an important facet of the Passion, 'that natural man — not Pilate and not Satan — is ultimately guilty of Christ's death' (p. 234). For Kolve, Pilate epitomizes the moral complexity of all men, the combination of good and evil, and highlights the important fact that 'the real meaning of the Crucifixion is Christ dying to save those who kill him' (p. 234).

Alicia Nitecki elucidates the important point that each episode in the cycle plays 'is presented in terms of its eternal message, its application for all men, and its significance for the future'.<sup>21</sup> This may well be said, too, of the characters who make up the action of each episode. Cast in this light, Pilate can be seen to stand midway between good and evil. As such, he is the chief representative of the earthly kingdom with whom spectator and reader can readily identify (p. 69). Contributing to this is the scene with his wife where, if he is, in Nitecki's terms, 'venial and lascivious', he is also 'recognizably human' (p. 72).

A close study and analysis of Pilate's part in the York Cycle evokes a complex and detailed picture of this important figure. A character emerges who, far from being inconsistent, has a logical coherence throughout the whole section in which he is involved as well as in each play. His pride and sensuality make him fearful of any action that might personally threaten him, but, in general, he shows an inclination to be just towards Jesus. The one time he deviates from this, in *The Remorse of Judas*, Jesus is not present, and it comes at a point where total

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<sup>19</sup>Williams, *The Characterization of Pilate in the Towneley Plays*, p. 58.

<sup>20</sup>Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 233.

<sup>21</sup>Nitecki, 'The Dramatic Impact of the Didactic Voice in the York Cycle of Mystery Plays', p. 62.

opposition is important for the dramatic purposes of the coming Passion. At other times, Pilate exhibits justifiable anger at the dishonest manipulations of the priests and scorn at the disloyalty of Judas. In the end, he allows his own inclination to free Jesus to be overridden because his basic indifference yields to incessant harangue; it is not so much weakness as apathy, not malice but bewilderment. The fate of one accused man does not really concern him greatly, though in this instance intimations of the consequences and magnitude of the action move him, from time to time, to argue in Jesus' favour. This is further confirmed by Procula's dream with its warning of vengeance if Pilate condemns Christ: 'Youre striffe [efforts]<sup>22</sup> and youre strenghe schal be stroyed, / Youre richesse schal be refte [taken away from] you þat is rude [great]' (XXX. 173–74). Of all the figures of the Passion, Pilate most approximates to the ordinary man who is alternately influenced by the desire to do good and by indifference to the fate of others unless personally involved or threatened. Pilate portrays a recognizable human condition with which any spectator or reader might identify and does not, therefore, fit into the conventional mould of villain or tyrant. No-one watching would feel any personal identification with evil figures like Caiaphas, Annas, or Herod the Great, whereas Pilate is enough like the common man to elicit feelings of recognition and sympathy. The York Pilate may be said to be a consistent and cohesive figure who acts in accordance with the dictates of ordinary human values, some of which contribute to the crime of the Crucifixion. He, like many people, lacks strength of purpose where he believes self-interest is not involved.

All the evidence concerning staging at York confirms the separateness of the individual plays. Each play would have had its own cast and, therefore, a different actor played Pilate whenever he appeared. In spite of this, and of the fact that at least two authors were involved in dramatizing the Passion, and even allowing for some inconsistency in the character assigned to Pilate, what remains impressive is the coherence of expression and attitude seen in his characterization from play to play. Informing this is a consistency of approach to the role of Pilate. The character is conceived in terms of his role, not as a monster of evil, but as a recognizable contemporary human, responding to extraordinary events. He provides a focus of normality amongst the vicious antagonism of Christ's enemies.

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<sup>22</sup>For *striffe*,? *stuffe*, 'possessions'.