PILATE IN THE TOWNELEY AND YORK CYCLES*

YOSHIMICHI SUEMATSU

The characterization of Pilate is one of the most interesting subjects in the study of the English Passion plays. It is partly because of Pilate’s importance in the Bible as the final judge who sentences Jesus to death. More significantly, the various interpretations of this character in the cycles fascinate us.

Still, Pilate would not be such an interesting subject to analyse if it were not for the Towneley Pilate. As is generally recognized, the Towneley Pilate is among the most wicked figures the English mystery cycles offer, and, as far as I am aware, there is no Pilate like him in any medieval work on the Passion. For instance, the N-Town Pilate seems rather sympathetic to Jesus, and, although hardly a full-fledged character, the Chester Pilate is in the same vein.

The York Pilate may be classed somewhere between the two types above. Critics widely disagree with each other in their interpretations of the York Pilate. Several of them group him with the “sympathetic” type.1 But, if one considers him similar to the Towneley Pilate, he does not do so without reason.2 After all, Rosemary Woolf’s reaction that the York Pilate is “morally parti-coloured”

* A part of this paper has been read at the 56th General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan. I would like to thank Professors Tamotsu Matsunami of Aoyamagakuin University, Shigeru Ono, and Kinshiro Oshitari of Tokyo Metropolitan University, and Mr. Robert H. Cotton of Daitobunka University for reading the original version of this paper and giving me valuable comments.


[197]
may be shared by most of the modern audience and readers.\(^1\)

In this essay, I shall focus on the characterization of Pilate in Towneley and York. As the Towneley cycle is largely based on the York, these two Pilates have much in common in detail. But I shall try to show that they differ markedly in basic conception.

Actually, the problem of interpreting Pilate’s character dates back to Biblical times. The four Evangelists write sympathetically about Pilate even though he is the Christ-killer: he sentences Jesus to death, yet only after much remonstrance against the pressure from the Jews. He was a very reluctant judge of Jesus. But historians of the Bible do not agree with the Evangelists. He was a Roman realist, probably quite an able administrator, as surmised from the relatively long term he spent in his position. But he does not seem to have particularly favoured Jesus and His followers.\(^2\) Why, then, were the early Christians so lenient to this Christ-killer? Because there is a political motive behind this strange attitude: faced with the persecution from the Roman government, the Christians felt the need not to condemn this Roman administrator while recording Jesus’s death; as Paul Winter suggests,

> The strategem of depicting Pilate as being unwilling to sentence Jesus to death is in line with the general pattern of Jewish and subsequent Christian apologetics addressed to the Roman authorities.\(^3\)

Therefore, if the need to flatter the Roman authority disappears, so does the need to be lenient to Pilate. In fact, this change of Christian view on Pilate occurred when the Roman government accepted the Christian religion, and beginning with the work of Eusebius, as Winter writes, “Pilate’s fortunes in Christian tradition enter upon a steep decline.”\(^4\)

Still one cannot totally deny the description of Pilate in the Bible. Consequently, medieval writings on the Passion waver between the

---

3. Ibid., p. 59.
Pilate in the Towneley and York Cycles

"sympathetic" and "unsympathetic" types of Pilate.

Another reason for the ambivalence which Rosemary Woolf suggests is that Pilate, by ordering the Crucifixion of Jesus, can be considered to have contributed towards man's salvation.¹

Among the medieval writings dealing with the Passion, many follow the Bible in their attitudes towards Pilate. They admit that Pilate is aware of Christ’s innocence, yet forced by the Jews into condemning Jesus. Among them are works such as The Northern Passion and The Pepsian Gospel Harmony which our playwrights are said to have been indebted to as their sources.² Rosemary Woolf says that the continental plays "often describe Pilate outright as guter mann or sant homs, and many build up a picture of a just and honest man struggling to reconcile justice towards Christ with his obligations towards Caesar and the Jews."³ As far as the Middle English writings are concerned, however, the authors do not so wholeheartedly approve Pilate. The poet of The Northern Passion suggests that Pilate went to hell.⁴ The poet of Meditations on the Life and Passion of Christ, although recognizing that "Pylat be iuge parceyved wel / Pat it [the accusation against Jesus] was fals evryvedel," also calls the same man Jesus's "felle fo."⁵ Therefore, it seems that the medieval English authors, even though they follow the Biblical view on Pilate, do not ignore the crime of the Christ-killer. I believe that one can apply the same conclusion to the Chester and N-Town playwrights.

Still, there are some medieval works which make an utterly un-

¹ Woolf, p. 246.
³ Woolf, p. 246.
⁴ The Northern Passion (Supplement), ed. Wilhelm Heuser and Francis A. Foster, EETS, OS 183 (London, 1930), ll. 1531–32. This point is mentioned in Kolve, p. 231, Note 85.
redeemable villain out of Pilate.¹ Thus, there was some basis for the creation of the unique character of Pilate in Towneley. G. R. Owst further suggests that the Towneley Pilate is a portrait of the unjust judges satirized in medieval sermons.²

Yet, even if an author envisaged Pilate as a despicable character, he could never entirely ignore the Biblical treatment of the man: when Pilate’s wickedness is emphasized, it is generally shown through something other than his judgement of Jesus. Even the very villainous Pilate in A Stanziaic Life of Christ condemns Jesus to death because of his fear of the Jews.³

In sum, while the medieval writings on the Passion in England do not wholeheartedly praise Pilate, they can hardly suppress the inclination to condemn this Christ-killer. But they do not totally ignore the Biblical Pilate either. Therefore, we should keep this dilemma in mind while considering the Pilates of the cycles.

I. The Towneley Pilate

To put it simply, the Towneley Pilate stands out in his extreme wickedness. He is another Satan decked with aristocratic attire. Like the Towneley Herold the Great, he claims his affinity with Mahomed: he is “the granser of great mahowne” (XX, 12).⁴ His bold counsellor points out that Pilate lies “in the dewyll seruyce” (XXIV, 178). His most striking characteristic is that he loves evil for its own sake; no other wicked character but Satan (not even Cain, or Judas, or Herold the Great) exposes such a revolting nerve. The clear evidence for this is the often-quoted passage in which he welcomes the wicked:

³ A Stanziaic Life, ll. 571ff.
⁴ The edition of the Towneley cycle referred to in this article is The Towneley Plays, ed. George England and Alfred W. Pollard, EETS, ES 71 (1897).
Bot all fals indytars,
Quest mangers and lurers,
And all thise fals out rydars,
Ar welcom to my sight.  (XX, 24–27)

The way he summons the wicked in this passage also suggests that he is clearly modelled after Satan who is the source of evil. Or, he may remind us of the Vice in the morality plays who is the vice-in-chief and sends out individual vices for various evil acts just as Pilate sends out the soldiers to arrest and torture Jesus.1 When Pilate salutes his soldiers as "curtes kasers of kamys kyn" (XX, 639), he seems to take it for granted that his soldiers are also evil. On the contrary, the judges and soldiers of the other cycles, whatever they may appear to us, are firmly convinced that they are acting right.

If this Pilate were truly Satanic, his ultimate aim would be to oppose and even replace God and His Son. Like Herod the Great, an antichrist, he acts like a god:

Atrox armipotens / I graunt men girth by my good grace,
Atrox armipotens / most myghty callyd in ylk place,
vir quasi cunctipotens / I graunt men girth by my good grace. . . .
(XXIV, 57–39)

While the other Pilates, if they did not positively defend Jesus, hate to take the responsibility of killing Him, the dearest "solace" to this Pilate is the "shedying of cristen bloode" (XXII, 46–47). This "unexplained hostility to Christ," as Rosemary Woolf puts it,2 must have been inspired by Satan.

We recall that the Chester Pilate is vexed about Jesus only when others suggest His crime against Caesar. In general, Pilate in the Middle Ages is the judge of a civil court and unconcerned about religious matters. That is not the case with the Towneley Pilate. He is greatly offended by those acts of Jesus's which concern Jewish religious law, while the other Pilates ignore charges arising from it. Whenever the priests and soldiers accuse Jesus of such allegedly wicked acts as healing the lame, breaking the Sabbath, and raising

---

1 For the "Vice" in morality plays, see Bernard Spivack, Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958), Chs. 5 and 6.
2 Woolf, p. 249.
Lazarus, Pilate explodes with vile curses against Jesus (XX, 92ff.). When a soldier happens to mention that Jesus went into the Jewish temple, Pilate becomes furious (XX, 150ff.); Pilate's strong reaction to this purely religious matter even takes his own soldier by surprise:

lord, we wist not youre wyll;
   with wrang ye vs wyte;
had ye so told vs tyll,
   we shuld haue takyn hym tyte. (XX, 158-61)

This soldier seems to regard his master as a civil administrator. Yet, while reproaching the soldier, Pilate appears to consider that religious matters are also under his jurisdiction:

The dwill, he hang you high to dry!
   whi, wold ye lese ooure lay? (XX, 162-63)

Now that his meddling with the religious matters and especially the religious law is obvious to us, he shows himself more clearly as a foe of Christ. We have seen that, in medieval writings, it is generally thought that Pilate sentences Jesus to death because of his fear of the Jews. But the Towneley Pilate certainly does not fear Jews. He is their good friend, working together towards the execution of Jesus. Instead, he fears Jesus and His New Law:

he prechys the peppyll here / that fature fals ihesus,
   That if he lyf a yere / destroy oure law must vs;
And yit I stand in fere / so wyde he wyrkys vertus,
   No fawt can on hym bere / no lyfand leyde tyll us;
   Bot sleyghtys
Agans hym shall be sought. . . . (XX, 37-42)

As is shown in this passage, he admits Jesus's innocence, yet still tries to trap Him. Furthermore, he suspects that what Jesus claims is true, that He is truly the Son of God. Brooding over Jesus's teaching about the Trinity, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and the Salvation of mankind through the Crucifixion, Pilate says:

If this be true in deyd,
   his shech shall spryng and sprede,
   And ouer com euer ylkone. (XX, 51-53)
Another example of the same fear and suspicion, only more explicit, is:

To trow that he is godys sou my hart wold all to-clefe,  
Though he be neure so trew both in dedys and in sawes . . .  
(XXII, 42–43)

By trying to kill Jesus even though he senses Jesus is God’s Son, the Towneley Pilate seems more wicked than Satan who, having experienced the fall, is too shrewd to fight directly against Him as witnessed in the episode of the dream of Pilate’s wife. I strongly doubt whether our twentieth-century minds are capable of assessing how radical a creation this Pilate is. In an age of faith such as the Middle Ages, a Christian playwright who is a lower cleric would create a human character who kills Christ because He is God’s Son! Even Judas is given a motivation, and he is human enough to regret the betrayal and to hang himself. The Towneley Pilate is, therefore, a creation with Satanic evil worsened by man’s ignorance of God’s power.

In practice, the Towneley playwright effectively expresses Pilate’s wickedness through his hypocrisy. Generally, the villains in the cycles straightforwardly act out their wickedness. Certainly, there are some other hypocritical double-tongued characters such as Judas and Mak. But their falsity is known to some other characters on stage. In the case of the Towneley Pilate, the audience is the only witness of his hypocrisy. From his lines, we can vividly envision how he would talk to the audience before the other characters appear on the stage. After a round of the conventional boasting, he suddenly lowers his voice and whispers that he will pretend to defend Jesus:

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

This peculiar shadiness consistently hovers around Pilate. When Judas comes to sell Jesus to him, Pilate stresses that Judas should keep their bargain absolutely secret (XX, 294–97). Again, to the soldiers who have come to report the death of Jesus, however pleased
he may be, he orders them to keep their mouths shut about the affair (XXIV, 238–39).

Where did the Towneley playwright get the idea of creating such a unique Pilate? One likely background of this characterization is the morality tradition which possesses hypocritical characters. They are literally called “Hipocricy”, “New-Guise”, and other names of this sort, specializing in deception. Thus, even though the Towneley Pilate is unique in the cycles for his double-tonguedness, at least the playwright may have gotten some inspiration from a morality play. In fact, just as those hypocritical characters in the morality plays invariably impress their friendship on the “Everyman” figure, our Pilate also “shall fownde to be his [Christ’s] freynd vtward.

...”

Although this affinity with some of the morality characters is not recognized by critics, another background of his characterization has been fully elaborated, namely the image of Pilate modelled after the contemporary corrupt judges in Britain. G. R. Owst certainly does not fail to compare the Towneley Pilate with the unjust judges of the medieval civil court as found in the sermon satires. Yet, without any recourse to the other homiletic literature, the text itself should supply evidences of Pilate’s affinity with his medieval counterparts. The playwright makes Pilate himself confess this source of inspiration, with a bit too obvious medievalization:

for I am he that may / make or mar a man;
My self if I say / as men of cowrte now can. . . .

(XX, 19–20; emphasis added)

Let me cite another passage which illustrates his nature and contemporary background better than anywhere else:

I am full of sotelty,
flashed, gyll, and trechery;
Therfor am I namyd by clergy
As mali actoris.
for like as on both sydys the Iren the hamer makith playn,
So do I, that the law has here in my kepyng;
The right side to secoure, certyr, I am full bayn,

---

1 Owst, pp. 425–96.
Pilate in the Towneley and York Cycles

If I may get thereby a vantege or wynyng;
Then to the fals parte I turne me agyn,
ffor I se more Vayll will to me be risyng....

(XXII, 10-19)

Most of these lines are self-explanatory. Still, a very revealing article by Sister Nicholas Maltman makes us more clearly understand its connotation.1 According to her, the phrase “as malleatoris” (as a doer of evil) seems to be a corruption of “os malleatoris” (the mouth or mask of the hammerer). This phrase is frequently connected with Pilate’s name in medieval Latin writings, or, in her words, “The expression ‘Pilatus qui os malleatoris interpretatur’ became an exegetical commonplace....”2 With this notion in mind, the whole passage makes better sense. This Pilate (or “the mouth of the hammerer”), depending on the bribes he gets (as “the Iren the hammer”), wavers in his judgement. The passage again confirms what a despicable nature this Pilate has, and what a great skill the playwright possesses to create such a character.

II. The York Pilate

Pilate in the York cycle has been a puzzling character for critics; there are a wide variety of views on him: Waldo F. McNeir says that “he does his best to be humane,” while Martin Stevens considers him “a straightforward villain”.3 We will see in this section that he is certainly “a straightforward villain,” but not the kind of the Towneley Pilate.

First, we must ask if he is really sympathetic to Jesus. It is no wonder that many students of the cycle consider him sympathetic. We see Pilate stubbornly defending Jesus and scolding the priests for falsely accusing Him. Even the priests realize this. Pointing at Jesus, Annas says to Pilate, “his foole pat ye fauour” (XXX, 487).4 So we must recognize that Pilate favours Jesus, at least from

2 Maltman, p. 309.
3 McNeir, p. 612; Stevens, p. 459.
the priests’ viewpoint. Nevertheless, there is no reason why we need to agree with their view towards Pilate. Or, for that matter, we do not have to trust Pilate’s word literally, when he says, “of pat renke haue I rewpe” (XXX, 305). Since the plays of the trials before Pilate proceed in the conflict between Pilate and the Jews, this shrewd Pilate could say things which trip the excited priests. As the struggle between Pilate and the priests is more elaborate in York than in the other cycles, it is important for us to assess their words and actions in the context of this power struggle.

If Pilate truly thinks that the Jews’ accusations are unfounded, why does he take part in the conspiracy? No Evangelist in the Bible writes that he is with the Jews when they meet Judas. Nor does the N-Town Pilate appear during the conspiracy. This makes us doubt that Pilate is really sympathetic to Jesus.

In fact, we generally get the impression that Jesus is a political nuisance to Pilate. This becomes obvious when Pilate hears that Jesus is from Galilee. He seems visibly relieved as he can now be done with this whole problem:

Nowe with-outen fagyng, my frendis, in faith I am fayne,
For now schall oure striffe full sternely be stede.

(XXX, 513–14)

This sense of relief is further attested by observing how he calls Jesus before and after the decision to send Him to Herod. As soon as he makes the decision, he says:

Sir knyghtis þat are cruell and kene,
That warlowe ye warrok and wraste,
And loke þat he brymly be braste;
And þerfore, sir knyghtis [in haste],
Do take on þat treyonre you be-twene.
Tillé Herowde in haste with þat barlott ye hye. . . .

(XXX, 524–29; emphasis added)

Both the terms which he calls Jesus with and how he says they should treat Him show that Pilate is far from sympathetic to Jesus. And it is not just after one of those occasions where the priests succeed in agitating Pilate against Jesus by alleging that He is against Caesar. The decision is made just after Pilate has scolded the priests for their
malice against Jesus (XXX, 506). Of course, this evidence can not be upheld if Pilate consistently treats Jesus in the same way. But, in this same scene, up to the decision, he has generally been calling Jesus less harshly, using words like “freke” (415), “boye” (479), “segge” (497), and “ladde” (501).

In the “Second Trial before Pilate,” there is a curious detail which may be interpreted as a sign of Pilate’s sympathy towards Jesus, namely Pilate’s bowing to Jesus. But if one looks at the scene closely, this detail further indicates that Pilate is not sympathetic to Jesus. In this scene, Pilate has just witnessed that the banners bow to Jesus despite all the efforts of the stoutest soldiers. Pilate is, like the soldiers who are trying to hold the banners straight, doing his best to keep his dignity; yet just as the banners bow, Pilate is forced to worship Jesus. The playwright is simply creating parallel actions to demonstrate Jesus’s unbending power despite the difficulty which He is in. Pilate bitterly expresses his spiritual defeat:

I was past all my powre, þogh I payned me and pynd,
I wrought not as I wolde in no maner of wise.
Bot syrs, my spech wele aspine,
Wightly his wayes late hym wende,
Þus my dome will dewly deuyse,
For I am ferde hym in faith to offende,
In sightes. (XXXIII, 279-85)

If he is not sympathetic to Jesus, why does he defend Jesus? I agree with Robert A. Brawer, who considers Pilate primarily as “the administrator of the pagan court,” being “shrewd and rational in the exercise and preservation of his power.” In fact, Pilate is certainly the most shrewd of the villains in the York cycle. His intelligence reveals itself in his usual self-restraint which is much in contrast with the priests’ hastiness and irascibility. He is generally willing to listen to others, certainly as a judge; yet he also listens to his servant as he does when the beadle advises against his indulgence in sexual pleasure with his wife. He generally speaks with an intel-

---

2 See *York, XXX*, 64ff.
ligence superior to that of the priests, and, as Brawer also points out,¹ is capable of making ironic statements. When the priests accuse Jesus of practicing sorceries, i.e., performing miracles, Pilate tells them:

Yha, for he dose wele his deth for to deme?
Go, layke you, sir, lightly,
Wher lerned ye such lawe? (XXX, 450–51)

He can also trap the priests in their shaky argument against Jesus by posing an ironic question:

Pilate: Yhis, his fadir with some farlis gan fare,
And has lered pis ladde of his laie.
Annas: Nay, nay, sir, we wiste pat he was but a write,
No sotelte he schewed pat any segge saw.
Pilate: Thanne mene yhe of malice to marre hym of myght,
Of cursidnesse convik no cause can yhe knawe.
Me meruellis ye malyngne o mys. (XXX, 500–06)

In Pilate’s initial boastings, we can easily detect that the playwright intends to shape his Pilate as a Roman politician. In the “Remorse of Judas,” Pilate boasts his power in his region: “Per is no berne in pis burgh has me aboute heuyd” (XXXII, 11). The first lines of “The Conspiracy” are more explicit:

Vndir þe ryallest roye of rente and renowne,
Now am I regent of rewle þis region in reste,
Obeye vnto bidding bud bussoppis me bowne. . . .
(XXVI, 1–3)

The passage above shows not only his Roman identity, but also the possibility of the conflict resulting from it. In fact, his status as a Roman politician and his loyalty to the Roman law and emperor are the causes of the conflict between the Jews and Pilate. This is already shown in the Bible. Yet, in the cycles other than the York, Pilate’s Roman identity seems to be forgotten, while the York playwright plays it up.

The problem about Pilate from the priests’ side is that he is not a

¹ Brawer, pp. 293–94.
Pilate in the Towneley and York Cycles

corrupt politician who, like the Towneley counterpart, wavers in his decision according to how much he gets as bribes. He is pretty rigid about keeping his law intact, that is, the Roman secular law. Pilate lends his ears to the beadle's advice because he thinks it is in line with the law,¹ and because the beadle wisely stings the conscience of Pilate as a judge by calling him a "lider of lawis" (XXX, 55). Priding himself so much as an excellent judge, he cannot but heed the beadle's advice. He is insisting on observing the law when he says, "I will lose no lede þat is lele to oure law" (XXX, 363), and "To noye hym [Jesus] nowe is youre [the priests'] noote, / But ȝitt þe lawe lyes in my lotte" (XXVI, 67–68). These statements could be taken as the signs of his sympathy towards towards Jesus; yet, once we recognize his rigid observance of the Roman law, these lines should sound otherwise. Critics have noticed that Pilate ignores all accusation against Jesus except those which concern his own power, but have failed to see that this characteristic points to his identity as a shrewd Roman politician.² Jesus's acts such as breaking the Sabbath, performing the miracles, and disturbing the Jewish temple are absolutely appalling to the priests, yet do not annoy Pilate a bit, because his law does not concern these acts. Only when they accuse Jesus of claiming to be a king and challenging Caesar, is Pilate enraged against Him. Therefore, the whole trial before Pilate is a continuous clash of the two different sets of standards.

Now that we have seen that Pilate's defense of Jesus has nothing to do with his moral nature, we are ready to assess objectively how good or villainous he really is. Actually, it is even puzzling that many critics find him either sympathetic or morally ambiguous. All his boastings and slothful lifestyle point to him as a pure villain. He

¹ See York, XXX, 67, 82–83. Brawer (p. 293) thinks that Pilate listens to the beadle because he is more temperate(!) and tough-minded than he appears to be, which is an untenable view; the evidences of his intemperance are many: see, for example, the scene of drinking and sexual flirtation between Pilate and his wife in XXX, 48ff.

² Rosemary Woolf, for example, writes, "The dramatist seems to have hit upon a fairly straightforward distinction, namely that Pilate is reasonable, even sympathetic, whenever Christ is represented only as a threat to the Jews, but raging and furious when his own power seems to be threatened. It is difficult to know what further conclusions should be drawn" (p. 248; emphasis added).
makes it clear himself, saying, "Beware, for wystus I am" (XXVI, 14). In fact, he embodies most of the seven deadly sins, probably except envy, since he is so proud of himself that he needs to envy no one. If one takes the view that Pilate is "humane" as McNeir does, how can he explain the episode about Calvary locus where Pilate cheats the place out of a squire? Pilate is simply a villain and the episode amply elaborates his covetousness.

Moreover, although the York Pilate is not truly Satanic as the Towneley Pilate is, the playwright bestows on him many details which remind us of the lord of the hell. In "The Creation and the Fall of Lucifer," Lucifer boasts of his beauty in the conventional terms:

O! what I am fetys and fayre and fygured full fytt!
Pe forme of all fayrehede apon me es feste,
All welth in my weelde es, I wete be my wytte,
Pe bemes of my brighthede are bygged with pe beste.
My schewyng es schemerande and schynande,
So bygly to blys am I broghte. . . .

Pilate, too, boasts of his brightness with no less pride:

For I ame pe luffeliest lappid and laide,
With feetour full faire in my face,
My forhed both brente is and brade,
And myne eyne pei glittir like pe gleme in pe glasse.
And pe hore pat hilles my heed
Is even like to pe golde wyre,
My chekis are bothe ruddy and reede,
And my coloure as cristall is cleere.

In York, there is another curious detail which stresses his villainousness, that is, his genealogy. This detail does also appear in the Towneley Processus Talentorum, although it is disposed of in one line and carries no dramatic importance. Similar kinds of genealogy

1 See York, XXXII, 316ff., especially 358–61. Confused about this undoubtedly villainous act of Pilate, McNeir suggests that "the scene may be an interpolation of another writer" (McNeir, note 58).

2 See York, XXX, 10–18.

3 In his initial ranting, Pilate declares, "Stemate regali, kyng atus gate me of pila . . ." (XXIV, 19).
of Pilate are found in *A Stanzaic Life of Christ* and John Mirk’s *Festial*.¹ I strongly suspect that all these have directly or indirectly originated from *Legenda Aurea*, a widely read, very influential writing in the Middle Ages. The work presents the most logical and least corrupt version of Pilate’s genealogy among the works above. Caxton’s translation runs as follows:

There was a king called Tyrus which knew carnally a maid called Piliam, which was daughter of a miller named Atus. And of this daughter he engendered a son. She took her name and the name of her father, which was called Atus, and composed thus of their names one name to her son, and named him Pilatus.²

While *A Stanzaic Life of Christ* correctly reflects this version concerning the names and relationships of Tyrus, Piliam and Atus, the versions of the Towneley play and *Festial* are corrupt and illogical. In York, Pilate’s mother is Pila, grandfather Atus, yet his father “Sesar” (XXX, 10). This replacement of Tyrus by Caesar is what characterizes Pilate’s genealogy in York. Pilate is eager to praise his father who is “That exelent Emperoure exaltid in hight, / Whylk all pis wilde worlde with wytes had won” (XXX, 11–12). After having boasted of his genealogy, Pilate goes on to stress how much power Caesar has endowed him with:

Loo! Pilate, I am proued a prince of grete pride,
I was putte in to Pounce þe pepill to presse,
And sithen Sesar hym selfe with exynatores be his side,
Remytte me to þe remys, þe renkes to redresse.
And yitte am I graunted on grounde, as I gesse
To justifie and juge all þe Iewes. (XXX, 19–24)

This passage shows that the York playwright is consciously attempting to contrast Pilate with Jesus. Pilate, a prince of great pride, is the son of great Caesar who is surrounded by the senators; he was sent by the father to judge all the Jews. Obviously, Pilate, in this boasting, is described to be a reverse reflection of Jesus who is the humble Son of God the Father. The Father is surrounded by the angels,

¹ *Stanzaic Life*, ll. 6433–48; *Festial*, p. 120.
and has sent Jesus to save mankind. Significant is that, in Pilate’s hierarchy, the highest position is occupied by neither Satan nor Mahomed, but by Caesar. The set of values of this terrestrial king is so corrupt that he has an almost religious faith in Caesar.

This again shows that the York Pilate is quite minutely characterized as a man who is fatally mired in the worldly vices. In fact, the playwright makes him effectively embody the sorry state of the fallen mankind, or, in V. A. Kolve’s words, of “natural man.” This recognition which is crucial to distinguish the York Passion from the others, especially from the Towneley Passion, allows us to understand a character who is given an important role only in York, namely, Pilate’s wife.

Much has been written about the two stories of marriage found in the cycles, i.e., Noah and his wife, and Joseph and Mary. As a reading of The Canterbury Tales makes us aware, the theme of marriage seems to fascinate the late-medieval mind. This theme is important because not only it involves an everyday and universal problem of mankind, but also, while struggling with all the marital troubles, we repeat the same mistake as that which Adam and Eve committed. As the cycles describe the universal history of mankind, the plays dealing with the discord between Noah and his wife, and with Joseph’s doubt over Mary’s chastity are underlined by the pattern of the Fall which the audience has just witnessed in “The Fall of Man.”

Considering this medieval fascination with the universal story of marriage, it is no wonder that the York playwright, while adapting the episode of the dream of Pilate’s wife from the Bible and the Gospel of Nichodemus, takes a step further towards giving this wife flesh and blood. Certainly, this pair is not like Noah and his wife. Theirs is probably one of the most fallen marriages on earth. Their pride, lechery, and gluttony illustrate the fallen state of mankind. Yet, however gravely fallen they may be, they still carry the same characteristics that Adam and Eve have shown. It is Percula who curses the beadle while Pilate calmly persuades her to listen to advice. The word “law” which simply enrages Percula sobers Pilate down.

Thus, after the appropriate preliminary at the beginning of the “First Trial before Pilate” to make Percula a type of Eve, the episode of the dream of Pilate’s wife becomes very persuasive. Originally, the account of this dream in the Bible and the Gospel of Nicho-
Pilate in the Towneley and York Cycles
denus gives us no hint about the kind of force behind the dream. They simply report that the wife has greatly suffered from it. But, in York as well as in N-Town, Satan is the one who troubles the wife in her dream. At this point, the devil is certainly aware that the death of Jesus will deprive him of his captives in the limbo; therefore, he has to do his best to stop it. In this manner, an isolated detail of the Bible is viewed in the perspective of the universal history and bears a signal importance. Moreover, the York playwright, by initially characterizing Percula as a type of Eve, further clarifies the episode. Just as Eve is an easier prey of the devil than Adam because of her weakness of will and lack of reason, Satan again chooses the weaker sex to pursue his objective. The audience also witnesses Percula's vulnerability and her similarity to Eve by watching the actor (or, the actress) playing the role lying in bed "All naked" (XXX, 187). A medieval preacher adresses sinful men in these terms: "pou pat arte in deedly synne, will pou see how pat pou arte downe and also naked?" As the nakedness is a metaphor of the spiritual depravity in this sermon, so is Percula's nakedness. In The Southern Passion, the devil, wondering how he can overcome Jesus, decides to sneak into the dream of Pilate's wife, because "wymmen to overcome esy and Mylde were." Thus, through the spiritual weakness of Percula, as well as through his own spiritual depravity, Pilate falls into the gravest sin, and repeats the fault of Adam and Eve, although this time his sin is far more horrible than Adam's.

Thus the evidence we have so far examined sufficiently indicates the specific nature of the York Pilate. He is mired in all kinds of

---

2 The actors and maybe actresses, playing the parts of Eve and Percula, were not literally naked when the scenes required them to be so. They may have worn light-coloured costumes to indicate their nakedness. See William Tydeman, The Theatre in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 212–13. The female characters on stage may have been played by either actors or actresses, yet mostly actors. See Tydeman, pp. 119–20.
earthly vices, and puts his faith only in the earthly authority. Although he rarely antagonizes Jesus, he is spiritually too blind to recognize God in Him. He is an earthly king whose kingship is in no way inspired by God. In sum, he represents fallen mankind at its worst, and thus is the most deplorable inheritor of Adam's sin.

III. Conclusion

In this essay, my aim has been to show the basic difference between the Towneley and the York Pilates: the former is a devil-incarnate and a true foe of God, while the latter a spiritually blind, sin-infected descendant of Adam. I may venture to add that these basic features of characterization are not limited to the case of Pilate. The Towneley playwright is always apt to push human wickedness to the point of infernality. On the other hand, the York playwright keeps a theologically more orthodox line and strives to show the spiritual corruption of mankind.

Received June 8, 1984