

**‘I KNOW MY PLACE’:  
Some Thoughts on Status and Station  
in the English Mystery Plays**

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**Introduction**

Terms of spatial and geographical reference lend themselves readily to metaphorical extension. ‘He seemed rather distant’, we say; ‘I see where you’re coming from’; ‘That’s pretty far-fetched’. Consider, then, ‘I couldn’t place him’ and ‘I put him in his place’. The former reflects the discomfort that we feel when we cannot find a context by which we can identify someone. The latter indicates the way in which we expect others to recognise the implicit limits within which they are free to speak and act in a given situation.

In this paper I want to look at two different ways of using literal space to place characters in relation to their fellow characters in the play and to the audience outside the action. I want to suggest that these differences make transparent and hold up to scrutiny priorities and presuppositions implicit in urban societies performing the plays. I have taken my examples from the play-cycles of the cities of York and Chester.

**Pilate in York**

York’s Play 30, *Christ Before Pilate I: The Dream of Pilate’s Wife*, by the Tapiters and Couchers, has, as its ostensible subject, Pilate’s deferral of sentence on Christ. But dramatically the tension of its action springs from a demonstration of social ‘place’, which is conveyed both verbally and visually. Even before a word is spoken, we observe a place, a room in Pilate’s headquarters in Jerusalem. Our dramatist seems to have in mind contemporary changes in the domestic architecture of the aristocracy that reflected a shift in the social and power-structures of society. That setting perhaps suggested both the staging and the underlying structure of the action.

Pilate’s headquarters suggest the residence of a medieval lord. We see as the stage-set his upper chamber, which has a retiring room off it, and which implies a hall below. As Chris Given-Wilson says:

Chamber and hall symbolise the ‘upstairs’ and ‘downstairs’ elements of the household — and often quite literally, for the hall, where the

lesser servants congregated, was usually on the ground or first floor, with the chamber at first or second floor level.<sup>1</sup>

The chamber served a dual purpose. First, it was the ruler's private apartment, to which he could retire with his family and personal servants. And that is the setting within which Pilate introduces himself and his wife to the audience at the start of the play (1–54) — from within the privacy of his 'home', with his beautiful wife, his son, and his valet, Bedellus, 'the beadle'.<sup>2</sup> Here Pilate and his wife can drink and flirt, here he can retire to 'my couche' (132), tenderly cared for by his Beadle in the rôle of personal valet. His wife, Percula, leaves for her own private quarters, 'hir wone' (81), elsewhere, represented by 'a bedde arayed of þe beste' (153) as befits the Couchers and Tapiters, in which she will lie and have her warning dream, inspired by the Devil.

But a nobleman's chamber was also the innermost chamber of government, a sort of inner cabinet. Again to quote Given-Wilson:

The seclusion of the king with a smaller and more intimate group of friends and advisors in his chamber may not be unconnected with the increasing number of accusations of 'chamber politics' in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

And so Pilate's chamber is resignified when Cayphas and Annas arrive at the hall, presumably at ground-level, and are admitted to Pilate's presence. Pilate greets them warmly as 'my prelates' (271) and invites them to enter his private space:

*Pilatus* Come byn, you bothe, and to þe benke brayde yowe 275

The 'bishops' demur:

*Cayphas* Nay gud sir, laughter is leffull for vs.

*Pilatus* A, sir Cayphas, be curtayse yhe bus.

*Anna* Nay good lorde, it may not be þus.

*Pilatus* Sais no more, but come sitte you beside me  
in sorowe as I saide youe. 276–9

Their place appointed by law is to be 'lower' than Pilate; their social standing has physical representation. But Pilate sets ceremony aside. Caiphas and Annas are part of the inner circle of government of the country, not representatives of a conquered people but the servants and representatives of Rome. So they literally 'cosy up' to Pilate, are 'placed' beside him as if equal.

All this will change when the relationship sours and Pilate redesignates the space. When the Beadle worships Jesus and Annas presumes to tell Pilate his business, Pilate angrily relegates the bishops to a lower position:

*Pilatus* Nowe go sette you with sorowe and care 363

literally as well as figuratively putting them in their place. At this point, private space becomes reconceived as the public area of trial. A court of law is formally convened and formally conducted and the audience suddenly called back to become engaged as participants:

*Pilatus* Crye pece in this prese, vppon payne þervppon,  
 Bidde them swage of þer sweying bothe swiftly and swithe  
 And stynte of ther struyng and stande still as a stone. 372-4

The bishops, by their intemperate responses, have lost their initiative and their place, demoted to a lower level. Private space opens to public scrutiny.

We are aware, as the bishops indicate, that Pilate's initial spatial concession is a gesture of political condescension to his social and ethnic inferiors. Pilate's opening words in the play identify him:

For sir Sesar was my sier and I sothely his sonne,  
 That exelent emperoure exaltid in hight  
 Whylk all þis wilde worlde with wytes had wone,  
 And my modir hight Pila þat proude was o plight ... 10-13  
 Loo, Pilate I am, proued a prince of grete pride.  
 I was putte into Pounce þe pepill to presse,  
 And sithen Sesar hymselffe with exynatores be his side  
 Remytte me to þer remys þe renkes to redresse. 19-22

Place is determined by birth. That has ensured Pilate's nepotistic advancement to a place of power, which has conferred this social and administrative authority. And that in turn locates and defines the social and physical place that he occupies; as Percula says: 'so joifull genologie to gentrys enioyned' (29).

This joyful genealogy ironically gives him power over Jesus, the man that he will judge, who, though almighty, has a different 'genologie', as contemptuously described in the previous play by Annas:

*Annas* Marie me menys his modir highte,  
 And Joseph his fadir as God me safe  
 Was kidde and knowen wele for a wrighte 29: 53-5

and reiterated here (502–5). As a social inferior, Jesus deserves no respect. Who you are establishes what you are in this context, and also what you represent — Rome and its emperor.

This space is also Roman space, ethnically definable. Pilate represents Rome and its values among a foreign race. He was sent ‘to justifie and juge all þe Jewes’ (24). The prisoner before him is ‘Jesu þe gentill of Jacob, þe Jewe’ (375), though perhaps set somewhat apart from his race as ‘one Jesu, þe juste man þe Jewes will vndo’ (288). Caiphas and Annas are placed ambivalently. They are bishops who here form part of government, as Pilate’s proprietorial possessive, ‘my prelates’ (271) suggests; contrast ‘yhe prelati’ 455, when the relationship has cooled. But they also represent the Jews, a conquered people, on whose behalf they now act; Jesus is brought to trial by ‘þe juges and þe Jewes’ (308).

Moreover, the dramatist anachronistically projects on to this ethnic divide the distinction between secular and ecclesiastical courts. The bishops are ‘placed’ by their judicial function as judges in ecclesiastical law beside the secular judge. The distinction is most probably reinforced visually by the different costumes. This anachronistic distinction explains the need for Pilate to condemn Jesus, since the ecclesiastical courts did not have the power to pass sentence of death. The ‘bishops’ must demonstrate to Pilate that Jesus committed the civil crime of treason, a fact which they repeatedly forget, just as they forget their place.

But as Roman space, Pilate’s chamber also reflects the limitations of his rôle. He has no contact with the place outside its walls, Jewish space, from which the bishops enter — in play-terms, the street outside and below the carriage. He therefore relies on reports from allies such as his bishops. In Play 29 Annas, asked about Jesus, speaks in the tones of a well-informed intelligence-officer:

*Anna* I haue goode knowlache of þat knafe. 29: 51

In Play 26, Pilate asks Cayphas:

Why, is þer any myscheue þat musteres his my3t  
Or malice thurgh meene menn vs musters to meke? 26: 31–2

We form an impression of a man isolated, under siege, nervously seeking intelligence of unrest within the socially and ethnically distinct populace who are both Jews and ‘meene men’. He seems even suspicious of his son:

Take tente to my tale þou turne on no trayse,  
Come tyte and telle me yf any thythyngis betyde. 30: 117–8

So, hearing the knocking at his door at night, his first request is for information:

Yha, spedely spir þam yf any sporte can þei spell. 246

In this context the Beadle is pivotal, because he has access to both Roman and Jewish 'places'. Socially a personal servant or equerry, dramatically he links the Roman world of the aristocratic governor and the outside world of the Jews. As a valued counsellor he belongs to the inner household 'family'; he knows 'all oure (the Romans') custome' (71). But he also knows 'oure (the Jews') lawes' (68). He controls access to Pilate's space and position, contemptuously dismissing the soldiers outside as 'vnconand knaves' (240). He feels sufficiently secure to kneel in worship to Jesus in defiance of the bishops (311–15).

Initially, the action seems containable within Pilate's private domestic space, with the 'inner cabinet' working together. But when Annas, perturbed by news of Pilate's Wife's dream, demands Jesus' death, he oversteps the limits of his office. Pilate reminds him:

Be ye neuere so bryme ye boþe bus abide  
 But if þe traytoure be taught for vntrewþe,  
 And þefore sermones you no more. 301–3

'Sermones' reminds the bishops of their actual subordinate rôle. Then, when the Beadle worships Jesus, Annas rashly presumes to remind Pilate of his administrative responsibilities and intrudes on the private discipline of the governor's household (329–33). Pilate, aristocrat, ruler, judge, will not be admonished by an inferior about a valued servant of his household:

... I will lose no lede þat is lele to oure lay 364

and it is then that the public court is convened and Pilate and the bishops, now clearly differentiated by social and physical position, engage in legal debate in which Pilate repeatedly draws the distinction between 'our lawe' and 'your lawe' to emphasise his superior rôle.

In this play physical 'place' becomes the vehicle of socio-political place, thereby exposing hereditary privilege and patronage, its empowerment and its emasculating disempowerment of those within it. Utilising the resulting tensions, the York Realist makes what we, the audience know to be historically impossible — the acquittal of Jesus — remain for ever still possible to our imaginations, opening an alternative view of history. For if Pilate refuses to accord with his bishops because of his internal

preoccupation with status and power, Jesus will be spared, and paradoxically our redemption will be averted.

### **Chester's Internationalism**

A different use of 'place' is evidenced by Chester's Play 7, *The Shepherds' Play* by the Painters and Glaziers. Here the geographical space between the city and its surroundings is invested with symbolic significance. The cultural gulf between the comically rustic shepherds of the country and the urban setting which they visit in both Chester and Towneley dramatises the implicit condescension of the urban audience towards their rural neighbours. But in Chester that distance has added resonance because of the city's literal proximity to the foreign land of Wales. Shepherds from Wales still brought their sheep from the Welsh hills to the outskirts of the city for shearing. Their language could be heard in the streets of Chester. Chester was conscious of its 'place' as a border town, until the sixteenth century a hostile border. Ironically, the Midsummer Watch, in which the shepherds also appeared, originated in the need to defend the city against the Welsh, and perhaps the comic presentation of the Welsh shepherds also suggests a sort of exorcism of Cestrians' former collective unease.<sup>4</sup>

Building on this situation, the play-shepherds explain their presence in the streets of Chester naturalistically as a search for their sheep lost in a storm. They have come into England from the 'wouldes' (1), travelling 'from comlye Conwaye unto Clyde' (Clwyd: 5).<sup>5</sup> They have names in common use in Wales: the second shepherd is Harvy (45), the third Tudd, short for 'Tudor' (60, 61, 65).<sup>6</sup> Their perceived 'otherness' in this English place is reflected in their enthusiasm for its exotic foreign foods — butter bought in Blacon (115), ale from Halton (117), a Lancashire jannock (120). But they have brought familiar food from their own 'place', their leeks (114), which they are confident that Trowle, their boy, will appreciate (156–7). Not only do they, as shepherds, proudly proclaim their expertise and technical knowledge of sheep-remedies unknown to 'townies' (17–40). Their competitive activities — wrestling (226–87), and singing (376–447 and sd) — seem stereotypically Welsh. The play also implies a superior attitude on the part of Cestrians to that alien 'place', with its crude pastimes and lack of inhibition.

The street-space of Chester becomes redefined historically by the coming of the angel and the journey to Bethlehem. That journey, a physical movement across the contemporary space of the street to the playing-place of the carriage, is also a figurative journey to the manger,

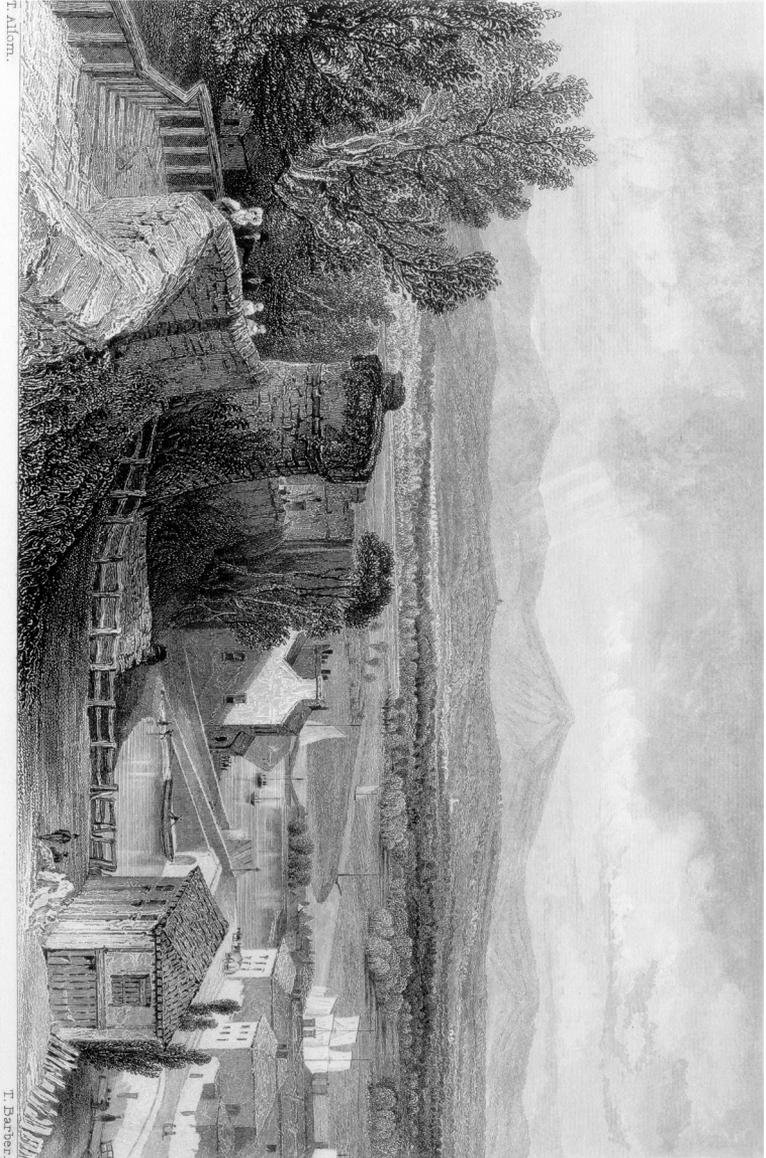


PLATE 2: Thomas Allom, engraved T. Barber: *View from the Walls of Chester – Looking into Wales* (1835–6)  
© Meg Twycross

where the Welsh rustics offer their touchingly inadequate gifts. Here the literal ‘outsiders’ to contemporary Chester become the historical ‘insiders’, first recipients of a spiritual revelation not yet available to others. Then, their offerings made, they descend from the carriage to the street. But this reversal of ‘place’ also marks a shift to symbolic mode. The shepherds announce their intention to exchange literal pastoralism for spiritual pastoral vocations, a reading of the story sanctioned by Bede.<sup>7</sup> While, as Kolve suggested back in 1966, this change of mode may encourage the audience to project a retrospectively symbolic reading upon the earlier literalisms, the anachronism of their new vocations also returns us to the contemporary time and contemporary place, the city street itself.<sup>8</sup> Hence there is a final irony at literal level when the shepherds leave the town of Chester, their sheep now abandoned, presumably for their own ‘place’, Wales, to spread the news to the unconverted.

This inventive use of ‘place’, both within and beyond the play-area, defines the achievement of this unusually multi-layered play. But although unique in its complexity, the play’s consciousness of ‘place’ as the site of difference recurs in Chester’s cycle. Take, for example, *The Nativity*, where two different ‘places’, the stable and Octavian’s palace, are visually juxtaposed. Not only are the two places themselves contrasted, with Octavian, the ruler of ‘all this world’ (6: 189) in all his splendour in Rome and the divine ruler in all His poverty in a stable; the two actions are separated structurally and dramatically, as if individual plays. So the Nativity narrative is abruptly intersected by Nuntius, who announces the entry of Octavian at line 177, as the focus shifts from stable to palace. Nuntius acts both as the choric introducer of a play to an audience (compare the speech of the Messenger which ends Play 4, lines 484–91) and the herald of a ruler making a royal entry into his city through the crowds. Chester was proudly aware of its own origins as Roman city.<sup>9</sup>

Chester uses the ‘Octavian’ action to widen the context of the Nativity. Octavian begins his census with:

The folke of Jewes, in good faye,  
in myddest bine; that is noe naye. 6: 253–4

Historically, this motivates the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. But the reference to the location of the Jews stresses not only the geographical centrality but the salvific centrality of the event. And at the same time it realises the Jews as a subject people, alien to their Roman conqueror. Dramatic ‘place’ again acquires multiple layers of significance.

Thus, in contrast to York, Chester's Pilate is ethnically rather than socially defined. The priests, in Play 16's compressed version of the trials, do not begin from a comfortable social relationship with their governor. Though he invites them to join him in judgement, presumably on the carriage, this is no private meeting; the audience is already involved:

Come up, lordinges, I you praye,  
and we shall here what he will saye  
amonge this fellowshipe here. 16: 136-8

They are Jews who have entered the Roman space of Pilate's court. Both Pilate and they are aware of their 'place' as aliens in this world and hence of the limits of their authority, which, unlike York, they do not overstep. They distinguish carefully between their law and that of the Romans but insist that on this occasion they both point to the same conclusion. While Cayphas puts the case on behalf of his nation:

By Moyses lawe liven wee  
and after that lawe dead shall hee bee ... 16: 295-6

Annas presses tactfully the Roman law, though under the guise of obedient subject:

And whoso calles himselfe a kinge here  
reves Caesar of his power. 16: 303-4

This evocation of Caesar takes us back in mind to the court of Octavian in Play 6 and to the subordinate rôle of the Jews he described. The ethnic 'Roman/Jew' divide is at the forefront here. So Pilate places himself apart from the priests ethnically when he engages Jesus in debate:

Naye, fay! Thyselpe may knowe and see  
that no Jewe am I.  
Men of thyne owne nation  
shewen for thy dampnatyon  
with many an accusatyon,  
and all this day have.  
Art thou kinge — say, for all ther crye? 16: 257-63

'No Jewe', 'thyne nation', 'ther crye', the distancing is emphatic, and 'see' reinforces verbal distinction with visual. Pilate seems almost to make common cause with Jesus here; both stand apart from the Jewish accusers. The journey of the priests from their own 'place' to Pilate's 'place' is thus a move from one set of cultural and ethnic values to another, from a

conquered nation to a ruling nation. Not surprisingly, given this emphasis, Chester places prime responsibility for Jesus' death upon the Jews.

### Conclusion

Martin Stevens has commented that York's 'unity as a cycle stems in large part from the city's interest in self-celebration'.<sup>10</sup> Its central episodes focus upon human relationships within a structured social system. In contrast, Chester's cycle looks outside the city to trace a relentlessly purposive movement of God's will across historical time and geographical space. Its widening vision culminates in the languages heard and the places listed by the two foreigners in 'Pentecost' as the apostles prepare to preach the gospel to all nations, and in the distribution of the kingdoms of the world by Antichrist.

Any attempt to account for this distinction must be speculative. The fact that York was the seat of the archdiocese and the northern capital, base of the Yorkist kings, might lie behind its socio-political bias. That its cycle remained attached to Corpus Christi, and hence was associated with a procession that, by general agreement, realised social hierarchy and defused social tensions might also have contributed. Chester, in contrast, gained political autonomy only in 1506 and rapidly lost it. Its rôle as a garrison town, the base for expeditions against the Welsh, Scots, and Irish, possibly reinforced this wider geographical awareness. As a Whitsun Play, distinct from Corpus Christi and civic procession, it might also be primarily concerned with the universal working of the Holy Spirit. Whatever the causes, we seem to have, manifested in these different uses of 'place', a contrast in communal self-awareness and identity.

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### NOTES

1. Chris Given-Wilson *The Royal Household and the King's Affinity: Service, Politics and Finance in England 1360-1413* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1986) 29.
2. Quotations from *The York Plays* edited Richard Beadle (York Medieval Texts; London: Edward Arnold, 1982).
3. Given-Wilson 29.
4. On the origins of the Christmas and Midsummer Watches, see L.M. Clopper REED: *Chester* (Toronto UP, 1979) li. There is a significant touch of menace in

the First Shepherd's listing of sheep cures when he claims that 'the woulde a whole man bringe to grownde / within a little whyle' (lines 19–20).

5. Quotations from *The Chester Mystery Cycle, Vol. 1: Text* edited R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills *EETS SS 3* (1974).
6. On *Harvy*, see E.G. Withycombe *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, second edition, 1950) 139–40, which indicates that the name was that of 'a favourite Breton saint and poet' and is not recorded (presumably in England) 'in the 14th–18th C'.
7. See note to line 660 in *The Chester Mystery Cycle, Vol. 2: Commentary* edited R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *EETS SS 9* (1986) 121.
8. V.A. Kolve *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966) 152–65.
9. Higden comments on its rôle as a Roman base and points to the underground vaults and passages engraved with the names of Julius Caesar and other great men of old; see *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higdeni monachi Cestrensis* edited Churchill Babington and Joseph Rawson Lumby, 9 vols (Rolls Series 41; London: Longman, Green etc, 1865–1886) 2 (edited Churchill Babington, 1869) 79–81.
10. Martin Stevens *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1987) 50.