Farcical Elements in the English Mystery Cycles

Peter Happé

In this paper I shall consider farcical elements in the five extant English mystery cycles. I hope to make this part of an extended study of the cycle form which I believe remains one of the most important achievements of the medieval drama. The cycles themselves are far from farcical, however, and the point of the present study is to try to discuss whether the compilers found that there were benefits to be gained by the inclusion of these items. Such an investigation, it must be admitted, is somewhat biased in favour of the idea that the answer is positive, but it does raise questions about the coherence of the cycles which are not easy to answer. There is plenty of criticism today which might hold that a predilection to see works like the cycles as integrated wholes flies in the face of the manifest discontinuities present in the texts as we have them, let alone speculation about the problems of coherent composition and performance which may or may not have taken place in the distant past.

The topic raises further questions concerning the nature and availability of farce in England at the time of the cycles, and it is at once apparent that we have nothing like as much information concerning this genre in England as about the existence of the culture of farce found in France from the years 1450–1530 approximately, years which saw the flourishing of the English cycles.¹ The lateness of the surviving manuscripts of the cycles gives us little help in deciding whether farcical elements were there from the beginning, or whether they were subsequently added; but I have noticed that in some of the manuscripts there are signs that farcical elements came in later as part of revisions at various depths. On the one hand this can be seen in the work
of the Wakefield Master in the Towneley Cycle where the extent of his revisions and re-writing are so great as to lead the recent editors to propose, not very convincingly, that he was ‘a major redactor’ of the whole cycle. But on the other hand smaller interpolations have been suggested for a number of farcical episodes which I consign to a footnote. Though the evidence for influence from the French farces upon the English cycles is hard to pin down, there is nevertheless, *prima facie*, evidence for suggesting its possibility. Interchange between the two cultures can hardly be underestimated. There can be no doubt, in parallel, that there was some cross influence from farce to morality play as can be seen in the practices adopted by Skelton and Heywood particularly. But even if these factors are not accepted, the information adduced below will facilitate comparative thinking between the two genres.

For the purposes of this paper I have in mind the following elements in the English Cycles, though I do not intend to discuss them all in detail:

- Cain in Chester 2
- Cain and Brewbarret in York 7
- Cain and Pikeharness in Towneley 2
- Noah in York 9, Chester 3, Towneley 3
- Joseph in N-Town 12, York 13, Chester 6, Towneley 10
- Den and Joseph in N-Town 14
- Shepherds in Chester 7, Towneley 12 and 13
- Herod and Women in Towneley 16
- Lover in Woman taken in Adultery, N-Town 24
- Pilate and Wife in York 30
- Christ before Herod in York 31
- Soldiers in York 35
- Soldiers and Torturers in the Cornish *Passio Christi*
- Pilate and Torturers in Towneley 24
- Mulier (‘Ale-wife’) in Chester 17
- Devils in Towneley 30

I doubt whether this list is comprehensive and it is rather subjective. It does, however, indicate that the episodes are well spread, and that there is a tendency to concentrate on certain incidents.