

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

David Mills

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