

CYCLING THROUGH HIGH WATER TO HELL

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As part of the 1985 University of Toronto performance of and international colloquium on the Towneley 'cycle', David Mills later published his remarks in "The Towneley Plays" or "The Towneley Cycle"?¹ Mills' sense of the dramatic integrity of individual pageants within the context of a mnemonic framework guides this present study of the six extant *Noah* texts, which in structural techniques, figuration, and memory can propel an audience from Old Testament salvation story to New Testament Judgement pageants. The *Judgement* pageants are not treated here except by inference, but correspondences and echoes between the two salvation episodes would reward further attention. 'From the outset' Chester Cycle editors Mills and R.M. Lumiansky 'saw the plays as the centre of an ever-widening range of contexts' and Mills later observed that, 'The plays respond to the changes around them by assuming new forms, in performance and in text, being repeatedly reinvented and revived to meet the changing needs of the town'.² The variety and change which he marked in Chester also holds for the other extant 'cycle' texts, and this piece on the *Noah* pageants thus is offered in tribute to David Mills' inspirational eye for both text and performance.

In part, David's article so impressed me because at the time he was one of the few people who agreed with me about the general nature of the Towneley manuscript. As he put it, 'The manuscript could almost be an idiosyncratic assemblage of material from a variety of sources into a sort of presentation volume, using a Creation-Doomsday framework of organisation'.³ As I put it, Wakefield local historian and physician J.M.W. Walker had invented or appropriated all but three of the putative drama records cited in his *History of Wakefield*, by means of which he, and most of David's and my colleagues, identified the Towneley manuscript with a Wakefield Corpus Christi guild cycle.⁴ Eventually I was able to create a respectable albeit speculative history for that 'idiosyncratic assemblage' of the Towneley pageants, and David

BARBARA D. PALMER

returned to the relative safety of 'Chester's nervously defensive and tonally consistent "Bible-cycle"'.⁵

In 'The Towneley Plays' Mills notes that 'play-cycles have traditionally been considered to have two interlocking frames': the historical, by which he means the authorized written narrative of biblical events and commentaries; and the generic, which he defines as 'the dramatisation of selections from that [historical] narrative initiated by the play of *Creation* and closed by the play of *Doomsday*'.⁶ As Mills appreciates, such 'goal-seeking' frames undervalue an audience's process of 'mental reconstitution', an invitation for 'the audience to recognise the selective, fragmented nature of the play-material they are witnessing and to search into their own memories of that historical frame'.⁷ In short, the unplayed pageants are recalled by the played so that in some respects those missing are retrieved by those present. In the process, the audience is pulled into an interactive role as participants in the very creation of the drama, a point to which I shall return.

This notion 'that cycle-form is a product of mental reconstitution and that one function of a cycle-narrative or play might be to excite such a reconstitution' is immensely attractive for several reasons.⁸ First, it better accommodates what historical shreds and patches of play cycles, both texts and records, survive. Since our early suspicions that the Towneley was a *compilatio*, the 'norm' of medieval drama — pageant-mounted processional Corpus Christi cycles performed by craft guilds — has been deconstructed into more variations than uniformities. As evidence of those variations continues to grow through the REED project's accumulation of single parish plays, cooperative parish plays, alternations of single plays, remnants of apparent cycles, and so forth, we are invited to look at our few surviving texts as potentially independent plays, to look at them as individual performance pieces rather than as more or less competent pieces of an historical whole. Granted that such an approach curtails the past century's cottage industry of speculation about missing leaves, missing bindings, missing stanzas, missing pageants, missing banns (and the occasional suspect supply of lacunae, like Walker's or Collier's), but such an approach produces the enormous advantage of enfranchising the audience's role, an enfranchisement which is at the heart and soul of Elizabethan drama. Earlier 'goal-seeking' frames asked us to postulate whole cycles, however