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PAPER- “And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD”: Medieval Judicial Tropes and the Characterization of Pilate in the York Cycle

ABSTRACT-

The portrayal of Pontius Pilate in the various Corpus Christi cycle plays is anything but consistent. The York Pilate in particular has garnered much critical attention, specifically because he seems to vacillate between sympathetic weakling and cartoonishly devious Vice. Arnold Williams has argued that this inconsistency is a literary flaw, situating the York Pilate as “marred...by the addition of extraneous comic matter or apocryphal incidents” (16). Robert Brawer attempts to defend this duality of the York Pilate by reading it as a sign of the character’s devious manipulation of the play’s subordinate vices.

My paper builds on Brawer’s notion of Pilate as an “intentionally complex” character, though I offer a different potential reading of that complexity. In order to understand Pilate’s role as a judge in the York cycle, my paper will pull together sources from a variety of both literary and visual arts. Through an analysis of extra-Biblical portrayals of both “Good” and “Bad” Pilates, various medieval assumptions on the meaning of the word “judge”, and the rich iconographic and typological portrayals of the Pilatian “washing of the hands” trope, my paper will argue that the York Pilate is neither “marred” nor “manipulative.” When read in tandem with other artistic portrayals of Pilate, I will argue that the York judge can best be viewed as an Everyman figure, and that the “inconsistency” of Pilate in York can be explained as an indication that the York trial plays contain clear signs of having been influenced by the Morality play tradition.