

"IF ONLY WE KNEW HIS NAME!"
THE PROVENANCE OF THE
TOWNELEY CYCLE MANUSCRIPT
and the identity of the Wakefield Master

by **CONRAD REITZ**

The response of the reader, student and scholar to most literature is defined by the text, as it has been transmitted to us from the mind of the author, in printed format. Critical evaluations may vary, and be based on a variety of schools of criticism. However, it is the text itself that is normally the point of departure.

It is generally understood and accepted that the various forms of medieval drama emerged from liturgical rituals as practiced in church services. They were adopted and adapted by the civic guilds, and performed in various ways - in a church, in the open, on church property, as part of a pageant or procession, in guild halls, in public squares and in other places where people assembled. There is some controversy as to whether or not the intent of this form of drama was to reinforce the teachings of the church and to convey a moral message, to adapt stories from the Bible for the edification and enlightenment of the people, or to provide a form of entertainment, pure and simple.

Nevertheless, the drama was constructed around the performances themselves, which included the ingredients of play script, actors, staging and audience.

The performances were in most cases based on texts whose origins are lost in antiquity. Most of the extant texts that have come down to us are transcriptions by a variety of scribes, serving a variety of purposes, such as actors' scripts, civic registers, etc. As a general rule, the function of the manuscripts was to provide a script for the actors, and also to maintain a consistent and authoritative text for future presentations. There seems to have been little or no interest in preserving the texts for posterity. Unlike illuminated manuscripts, which were treasured and preserved in monasteries, the survival of most medieval drama texts was fortuitous, and due to good luck rather than foresight.

The identity of the literary and dramatic artists who put pen to paper and created these plays is also not known. Only in one instance is there evidence of an individual whose hand and creative mind can be seen in some of the plays, the so-called "Wakefield Master." Exactly one hundred years ago, in the introduction to the first scholarly edition of the plays in the Towneley manuscript, Alfred W. Pollard cried out plaintively:

*If only we knew his name!*¹

In view of the centenary of the publication of this work, and the problems of

¹ Alfred W. Pollard, *Introduction*. In: *The Towneley plays*. ed. George England and Alfred W. Pollard (London: Early English Text Society/Oxford University Press, 1897) p. xii.

authorship and provenance of the manuscript that were addressed by the editors, it seems fitting to review the scholarship that has been undertaken in the ensuing century, and to examine the published literature, in order to determine whether we are any closer to knowing more about this unique document from a bygone age, and the person, or people, who were responsible for its creation and compilation.

Medieval drama comes down to us from before the days of the printing press, and forms a transition between the carefully-executed illuminated manuscripts of the monasteries, and the books printed from moveable type by Gutenberg and Caxton. All the extant manuscripts, with the exception of one cycle, now exist in single copies in British and American libraries. As Bevington notes:

*Some, including that of Towneley, appear to have been the original copy, or "register," held by the municipal authorities of the sponsoring city. The Towneley manuscript (evidently from Wakefield) is now at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California; the York and N Town manuscripts are in the British Museum. Of the five Chester manuscripts, three are in the British Museum, one in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and one at the Huntington*².

The manuscript texts that have survived the passage and the ravages of time have been studied and analyzed, and many of the conclusions that have been reached about their provenance are based on assumption, reconstruction, and extrapolation.

Even after the invention of printing, there appeared to have been very little interest in the wider dissemination of these texts for a newly-literate, book-reading

² *The Corpus Christi cycle*. In: David Bevington, *Medieval drama* (Atlanta: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) p. 241.

public, and there was no John Heminge or Henry Condell to rescue the documents from corruption or oblivion, as they did with the works of William Shakespeare (although, at least in the case of the Towneley manuscript, the so-called "Wakefield Master" may have played a role in the collection and preservation of the texts of the plays that it contains). In fact, interest in the theatre was all but extinguished as a result of Puritan censorship during the 17th century, and the existence of medieval drama was practically forgotten during the 18th century Restoration and early Romantic periods. However, published and edited editions of medieval plays started appearing in the 19th century, largely due to the leadership of the Early English Text Society, and the hard work and dedication of early scholars. The owners of manuscripts, usually members of the landed gentry, had been somewhat reluctant to make their treasured manuscripts available for study, as Barbara D. Palmer indicates:

*To the disgust of the scholarly community, the next two owners of the [Towneley] manuscript, John Louis Goldsmid and John North did not share "this remarkable volume"*³

However, as some of the manuscripts changed hands, the new owners were more readily inclined to submit them to the scrutiny of scholars, and scholarly edited texts were published, as more and more scholars began to show an interest in the field,

³ Barbara D. Palmer, "Towneley plays" or "Wakefield cycle" revisited. In: *Comparative drama* 21 (197-88) p. 320.

to explore and to make many new discoveries, and to draw provocative conclusions, although often as a result of assumptions based on speculative data. A variety of popular editions and anthologies also familiarized students and the general reading public with this hitherto little-known area of literature.

Richard Beadle has commented on the recent proliferation of scholarship and the quickening of interest:

If any area of mediaeval studies can be said to have changed out of all recognition over the past twenty years or so, it must be that of the drama. Re-editing of the textual corpus to modern standards has proceeded alongside a vigorous renewal of research into the nature and extent of the documentary evidence for dramatic and related activities. Important ancillary publications such as facsimiles of the manuscripts and concordances to the freshly-edited texts have appeared. Carefully-researched productions of the plays themselves have shed a new light on the original circumstances of performance, which scholars and historians of the early drama cannot afford to ignore,⁴

Recreated and restaged productions at York, at Toronto, and at the University of Illinois have been described by John Marshall,⁵ John Friedman⁶ and Peter

⁴ Richard Beadle, [Review of] *Contexts for early English drama*. In *Medium aevum* 60 (1991) p.121.

⁵ John Marshall, *Modern productions of medieval English plays*. In: Richard Beadle (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to medieval English theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp. 290-311.

⁶ John B. Friedman, *The Performance of some Wakefield Master plays on the University of Illinois campus*. In: John A. Alford (ed.) *From page to performance: essays in early English drama* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1995) p. 100.

McDonald.⁷ Medieval drama has come full circle, from the 14th century performances of the guilds to the 20th century performances of the medieval studies departments of Universities, as a result of the historical records preserved in city archives in the north of England, the treasured and unique manuscripts now housed in private collections and libraries in Great Britain and the U.S., and the scholarly research that has flowed from these records and manuscripts.

A great deal of material was probably lost during the censorship ravages of the 16th century, when religious ideas were changing, and texts were modified or excised to conform to acceptable current theological and political thought and practice, as a result of ecclesiastical or secular pressure, or as a result of precautionary self-censorship. There are numerous instances of changes or omissions in surviving manuscripts, and the scarcity of contemporary manuscripts is probably due to their destruction by secular and religious authorities, as well as to a lack of interest in or awareness of, the needs of posterity.

The context of self-censorship and the development of a "chilly climate" can be inferred from a letter that is alleged to have been written by Henry VIII to a Justice of the Peace in York:

⁷ Peter McDonald, *The Towneley cycle at Toronto*. In: *Medieval English theatre*, 8 (1986) 51-60.

*Whereas we understand by certain report the late and evil seditious rising in our ancient city of York at the acting of a religious interlude ... and whereas we have been credibly informed that the said rising was owing to the seditious conduct of certain papists who took part in preparing for the said interlude, we will and require you that from henceforward ye do your utmost to prevent and hinder any such commotion in future, and for this ye have my warrant for apprehending and putting in prison any papists who shall, in performing interludes which are founded on any portion of the Old or New Testament, say or make use of any language which may tend to excite those who are beholding the same to any breach of the peace.*⁸

Sometimes, the survival of a text, or of a manuscript, may be as a result of chance and coincidence. One of the earliest surviving examples of a medieval play manuscript, now known as the *Shrewsbury fragments*, was discovered in the lining of a book cover in the library of Shrewsbury school.⁹ Study has shown that these pieces of manuscript, which represent acting scripts for one of the actors in a York shepherds' pageant, date from the fourteenth century, but are probably a copy of a much earlier manuscript.

We can be thankful to those who, throughout the years, have played a role in the preservation of these priceless documents: in the first instance, the civic authorities and the guilds, and then the noble families or lorded gentry who came into the possession of some of these items. Subsequently this role was taken over by wealthy individuals and collectors, beginning in the 19th century, and then by libraries, which have in most

⁸ *York*. Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) (*Records of early English drama*) pp. 649-650.

⁹ Canon J. S. Purvis. *From minster to market place*. (St. Anthony's Hall: St. Anthony's Press, 1969) p. 8.

instances become the final resting place of these documents, which are now generally available for study and research by qualified scholars.

The Towneley manuscript, for instance may have been in the possession of the Towneley family for over 200 years before its existence became known to scholars.

Hardin Craig wrote:

*Its survival also seems to have been more or less accidental, and to be due to the fact that it also had the good fortune to fall early into the possession of private persons who prized it or endured it throughout the long period when mystery plays were forgotten or despised.*¹⁰

To this, Peter Meredith adds:

*The manuscript formed part of the library of Christopher Towneley, a seventeenth-century antiquary and collector, but how it came into his possession or where it came from is not known. As a Catholic, Towneley may have picked up and preserved the manuscript as a sample of a time when his faith was the acknowledged faith of the whole of the country.*¹¹

Even if we did not have manuscript evidence of the survival of medieval plays, there is a significant body of documentation which shows the nature, scope and characteristics of the beginnings of drama in the English language in England, and in particular in West Riding (now Yorkshire). Alexandra F. Johnston, who is one of the editors of the REED compilation of documents associated with York, has addressed

¹⁰ Hardin Craig, *English religious drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955) p. 206.

¹¹ Peter Meredith, *The Towneley cycle*. In: Richard Beadle (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Medieval English theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). pp. 134-135.

the issue that a study of medieval drama must necessarily extend far beyond the surviving texts. Financial accounts, records of ecclesiastical and civil courts, edicts, wills, property documents, letters, etc all provide significant evidence.¹² She indicates that

*The external evidence makes it clear that community drama, as it emerged in the fifteenth century, falls into three major categories: biblical drama, saints' plays and folk drama, particularly Robin Hood plays ... The broad pattern that emerges from the external evidence is of widespread folk drama throughout the countryside responding to the seasonal needs of a basically rural community.*¹³

Barbara D. Palmer also studied the sources for documentary evidence concerning the nature of drama in the Middle Ages.¹⁴ She set out to undertake a preliminary examination of the holdings of various record repositories in the region, using the principles of selection established by the REED Project.¹⁵ She indicated that appropriate categories for inclusion would consist of

ecclesiastical, civic and household accounts; letters; civic minute books; and almost any pre-1642 manuscript ... what was sought were all references to plays, pageants, playwrights, playhouses, pageant houses, players, fools, jugglers, itinerant entertainers, mumming ... liturgical plays ... formal visits by royalty or nobility

¹² Alexandra F. Johnston. *What if no texts survived? External evidence for early English drama.* In: Marianne G. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey, eds. ***Contexts for early English drama*** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). pp. 4-5.

¹³ Johnston, *ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Barbara D. Palmer. *Corpus Christi "cycles" in Yorkshire: the surviving records.* In: ***Comparative drama.*** 27 (1993/94) p. 218.

¹⁵ Alexandra F. Johnston and S.B. MacLean, ***Handbook for editors*** (Toronto: Records of Early English drama, 1980) pp. 14-15.

*with pageantic presentations ... special civic or parish events with elaborate ritual*¹⁶

She refers in particular to the difficulties of researching the provenance of the Towneley manuscript, and the difficulties of establishing its origins, because of the lack of contemporary documentation, and the confusion and false trails laid down by a certain John Walker:

*The Towneley text itself, by virtue of language, place names and manuscript annotations, clearly had some connection with the West Riding at some point in its history, but between 1928 and 1988 that connection was obscured by the ingenuity of John Walker, Wakefield physician and antiquarian. The Towneley manuscript contains two "Wakefield" annotations, four guild annotations, with one repeated, to make a total of five marginal references, and four Wakefield-area topographical allusions. External to the text are four surviving records, three from the Wakefield Burgess Court rolls and one from the York Consistory Court*¹⁷

She concludes that she remains convinced that the Towneley manuscript is a compilation of plays and texts from a variety of sources, including York, Doncaster, Pontefract, Fountains Abbey, and from the individual now known as the Wakefield Master. She remarks rather ambiguously, that

*After transcribing the surviving West Riding records in their twenty-seven locations, the co-editors of the REED West Riding volumes still judge the Towneley manuscript to be a "cycle" of accretion, over time, to which many Yorkshire communities made their many contributions.*¹⁸

John Walker's involvement in the history of the Towneley manuscript makes

¹⁶ Palmer, *op cit.*, p. 219.

¹⁷ Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

¹⁸ Palmer, *op cit.*, p. 228.

interesting reading, and is described by Palmer in somewhat more detail in an earlier paper.¹⁹ Walker was a Wakefield historian who wrote a history of the town, and had been sent the Wakefield Burgess Court Rolls in order to seek his assistance in deciphering them. He apparently never did return them to their rightful owner, and they subsequently disappeared, the only evidence of their contents being Walker's published references. Palmer provides evidence to indicate that Walker had these Rolls during his lifetime, even though he denied this. She goes one step further, however, and indicates in a note that

*when I visited Wakefield Cathedral in 1981, Mrs. Forrester and Mr. Harold Speak expressed their concern that local materials had disappeared into Walker's collection. Their concern was warranted.*²⁰

Shortly after this article was published, a paper by A.C. Cawley, Jean Forrester and John Goodchild clarified many issues relating to the performance of the plays in the Towneley manuscript at Wakefield, and cleared away the confusion and misunderstanding that had been caused by Walker's misappropriation of documents, and inadvertent or deliberate misinterpretation of them.²¹

¹⁹ Barbara D. Palmer, "Towneley plays" or "Wakefield cycle" revisited. *Comparative drama*, 21 (1987-88): pp. 319-348.

²⁰ Palmer, *ibid.* p. 345.

²¹ A. C. Cawley, Jean Forrester and John Goodchild, *References to the Corpus Christi play in the Wakefield Burgess court rolls: the originals rediscovered. Leeds studies in English* n.s. 19 (1988): pp. 85-104.

The Burgess Court Rolls, which refer to these performances, were rediscovered in 1988, and the authors corrected the dates and other matters, and placed the issue in perspective:

When Walker ... came to realize that the three authentic references in the Burgess Court records had a special importance in establishing the existence of a Corpus Christi play at Wakefield in the sixteenth century, he may have wished to reinforce this scanty evidence with picturesque details borrowed from the records of other towns ... Walker's readiness to reinforce the evidence of historical documents is apparent elsewhere ... It must, however be emphasized that even when Walker's additional items are discounted, there are still three authentic play references ... together with ... [a] document which virtually prohibits the play at Wakefield, firmly establish that Wakefield had a Corpus Christi play in the sixteenth century.²²

Alan H. Nelson has argued that, although the documentary evidence does indicate the existence of a Corpus Christi cycle in Wakefield, the records,

even the 1565 Burgess Court records twice mentioning speeches, concern the pageant procession rather than the dramatic cycle. No other documents concerning the Wakefield play are known. To understand how the cycle plays were staged, we are therefore entirely dependent upon the internal evidence available in the single surviving manuscript.²³

A number of scholars continue to dispute the concept of a Corpus Christi cycle, as a group of plays dramatizing events and episodes from the Bible, illustrating the history of Mankind from the Creation to the Last Judgment, forming a cohesive, sequential pattern, and acted or performed in a particular city. The Towneley manuscript, has been analyzed and dissected in terms of the missing parts that it

²² Cawley, *ibid.* p.99.

²³ Alan H. Nelson, *The Medieval English stage; Corpus Christi pageants and plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) p. 85.

should, speculatively, contain. Rosemary Woolf, for instance, states:

*The only cycle in which the different styles and stages of revision have not grown together into an organic whole is the Towneley cycle.*²⁴

Meredith draws attention to

*some odd gaps in the cycle, apart from those caused by the losses in the manuscript.*²⁵

David Mills considers these gaps to be evidence of incoherence:

*... the implication of generic coherence implicit in the term "cycle" relates to the dramatic diversity of the Towneley-play collection. The manuscript containing that collection ... is almost emblematic of the problem of coherence - seven plays incomplete, four plays out of sequence, twenty-eight leaves lost, probable censorship of three or four plays between plays 29 and 30 in the manuscript ... 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 organization.*²⁶

If Mills is correct in his assumption, he may have hit upon the reason why Christopher Towneley or his ancestor were attracted to this manuscript in the first place, and why it was decided to acquire it and to preserve it in the family library - because it was a representative selection of documents that seemed to have some intrinsic worth and historical and literary significance, and which may well have been collected, transcribed and collated by a fifteenth century equivalent of John Heminge

²⁴ Rosemary Woolf, *The English mystery plays* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972) p. 310.

²⁵ Meredith, *op cit.* p. 158.

²⁶ David Mills, "The Towneley plays" or the Towneley cycle"? In: *Leeds studies in English*, n.s. 17 (1986) p. 95.

and Henry Cordell.

Probably the most thorough description and a nalysis to date of the history of the Townseley manuscript has been by Martin Stevens.²⁷ The first time that the manuscript was edited and published for general distribution was in the Surtees edition, in 1836,²⁸ followed by the England and Pollard edition in 1897.²⁹ A. C. Crawley edited the Wakefield pageants in 1958,³⁰ and Martial Rose produced an edition of the same plays in modern English in 1962, primarily intended for acting. It also contained useful information concerning the staging of the plays.³¹ Another reading-and-performance-oriented edition appeared in 1983³². The facsimile edition of the manuscript saw the light of day in 1976.³³ The definitive annotated edition, edited by Martin Stevens and

²⁷ Martin Stevens, *The Manuscript of the "Towneley plays": its history and editions*. In: Bibliographical Society of America. *Papers*. 67 (1973) pp. 231-244.

²⁸ *The Towneley mysteries*. Ed. James Gordon and Joseph Hunter. (London: Surtees Society, 1836).

²⁹ *The Towneley plays*. Ed. George England and A. W. Pollard (London: Early English Text Society/Oxford University Press, 1897) (Early English Text Society. *Extra series*. no. lxxi)

³⁰ *The Wakefield pageants in the Towneley cycle*. Ed. A.C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958) (*Old and Middle English texts*)

³¹ *The Wakefield mystery plays*. Ed. Martial Rose (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962)

³² *The Complete plays of the Wakefield master; in a new version for reading and performance*, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Heinemann, 1983)

³³ *The Towneley cycle: a facsimile of Huntington MS HM 1*. Introd. A.C. Cawley and Martin Stevens (Ilkley, Yorks.: University of Leeds School of English, 1976) (*Leeds texts and monographs*)

A.C. Cawley, was published by the Early English Text Society as recently as 1994, in two volumes, volume one containing the text of the plays, and volume two containing the notes and glossary.³⁴

To complete the scholarly apparatus for the study of these plays, Michael J. Preston and Jean D. Pfliegerer compiled a KWIC concordance to the Wakefield group of plays.³⁵

The above discussion of the Towneley plays focusses on the manuscript itself, and any discussion of the actual content has been side-stepped. Although there is a significant body of literature dealing with linguistic, thematic and stylistic considerations,³⁶ there is very little discussion on the *authorship* of the plays, apart from the role of the so-called "Wakefield Master." However, it is apparent from much

³⁴ *The Towneley plays*. Ed. Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley. (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1994) 2 vols.

³⁵ Michael J. Preston and Jean D. Pfliegerer, *A KWIC concordance to the plays of the Wakefield master* (New York: Garland, 1982)

³⁶ Some studies that are outside the scope of this paper, but that are nevertheless of interest, include: Jessie D. Campbell, *The Idea of order in the Wakefield Noah*. In: *Chaucer review*, 10 (1975) pp. 76-86; Clifford Davidson, *Jest and earnest: comedy in the work of the Wakefield master*,. In: *Annuaire mediaevale*, ,22 (1982) pp. 65-83; John Gardner, *The Construction of the Wakefield cycle* (Carbondale: Siouthern Illinois University Press, 1974); Frederick S.Holton, *The Wakefield Noah: notes towards a patristic interpretation*. In: *Fifteenth century studies*, 19 (1992) pp. 55-72; Martin Stevens and James Paxon, *The Fool in the Wakefield plays*. In: *Studies in iconography*, 13 (1989-90) pp. 48-79. Arnold Williams, *The Characterization of Pilate in the Towneley plays* (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1950); etc.

of the discussion about this and other series of plays, and medieval drama in general, that the authorship and the role of individual writers in the creative process, will forever remain a mystery. One could believe that the plays were created in a type of workshop environment, such as has become popular in the modern theatre, where everyone involved with the production - actors, directors, sponsors/producers and even members of the audience, contribute to the work, which is subsequently revised, amended, adapted and added to by sundry scribes and editors.

In his introduction to the 1897 edition of the plays, Alfred W. Pollard confirms this communal approach to the authorship of the plays:

With the highly doubtful exception of the Chester cycle, not a single Miracle Play has the name of any author connected with it. The author's personality is wholly lost in that of the actors and their paymasters; and in the absence of any law of copyright or custom as to "acting rights," it was to the interest of these jealously to guard their book of words, lest the popularity of their entertainment should suffer from unauthorized rivalry. Since many of the players probably could not read, even the multiplication of their "actors parts" would be very limited, and fresh copies would only be made when the plays underwent revision.³⁷

However, Pollard does identify some of the plays as the work of a single author, (based largely on an analysis of stanzaic arrangements and rhyming schemes) whose literary abilities surpass all the other supposed contributors:

If anyone will read these plays together, I think he cannot fail to feel that they are all the work of the same writer, and that this writer deserves to be ranked - if only we knew his name! - at least as high as Langland, and as an exponent of a rather

³⁷ Pollard, *op cit.*, p. xv.

*boisterous kind of comedy that had no equal in his own day.*³⁸

The first person to use the term "Wakefield Master" in order to identify the shadowy, anonymous figure whose authorial hand is so clearly evident in parts of the manuscript, and who expanded on the idea of a single author for certain plays, as proposed by Pollard, was Charles Mills Gayley in 1907.³⁹ He discussed, in more detail, the characteristic nine line stanza of this hypothetical author, and emphasized the comic elements of much of his writing.

*Nothing like this had been produced by way of comic scene before and few things by way of native humour ... as a work of comic genius this little play [the Second shepherd's play] with its home-made philosophy, home-made figures and home-made humour with its comic business, its sometimes boisterous spirits, its quiet and shrewd irony, its ludicrous diction, its revelation of rural manners, its simple and healthful creed, its radiant and naive devoutness, its dramatic anticipations, postponements, and surprises, stands out English and alone, and a masterpiece.*⁴⁰

The next significant contribution to the study of the Towneley cycle was Millicent Carey's work, published in 1930.⁴¹ She set out to determine

how far the plays are original in substance and style, and how far they make use of material and technique which are part of medieval tradition. Only in this we can we

³⁸ Pollard, *ibid.*, p. xxii.

³⁹ Charles Mills Gayley, *Plays of our forefathers; and some of the traditions upon which they were founded* (New York: Biblo and Tannen 1968 [c1907])

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

⁴¹ Millicent Carey, *The Wakefield group in the Towneley cycle: a study to determine the conventional and original elements in four plays commonly ascribed to the Wakefield author*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1930. (*Hesperia; Ergänzungsreihe: Schriften zur englischen Philologie*. 11. heft)

*estimate fairly their place in the development of the drama.*⁴²

She then proceeds to make a detailed and elaborate line-by-line, word-by-word analysis of four of the plays (*Mactacio Abel*, *Processus Noe* and the two Shepherds' plays) with respect to phraseology, plot, characterization, and humour and realism. She draws attention to similarities and differences with respect to a variety of sources, such as the Bible and the York plays. All this was accomplished painstakingly in the days before computers were available for textual analysis and the compilation of concordances. She concludes that

*Since the 9-line stanza appears only in plays or parts of plays which are also peculiar in tone, we are certainly justified in assuming that wherever we find this stanza we have the work of the Wakefield Author. The metrical test is more difficult to apply when the stanza appears in irregular or broken down forms ... we can recognize the work of the Wakefield Master in stanzas which vary considerably from the 9-line form and furthermore that these variations are not late and corrupt developments ... but early, experimental forms of the normal stanza.*⁴³

In attempting to develop a literary personality for this mysterious dramatist, Carey notes that he drew from a wide variety of sources, and that he could therefore have been

a man widely read in current literature, and he used in his plays whatever appealed to him. Through his introduction into the plays of a great variety of secular material, he was, I think, largely responsible for the secularization of the drama. And while this quality of his work could serve as a test of authorship only to one familiar with medieval non-dramatic literature, it should be borne in mind as a

⁴² *ibid.* p. 9.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 237.

significant characteristic of his method ... his was no mediocre talent which elaborated traditional material in a lame fashion. He borrowed ideas and stories and even methods of expression from other people, but in so doing he made them new through his imagination and through his technical skill..⁴⁴

In 1958 A. C. Cawley, as a foretaste of the definitive edition of the plays to come nearly forty years down the road, introduced the six Wakefield plays to a new generation of scholars and students of drama and literature.⁴⁵ In his introduction he emphasized the influence and staging of the pageants, and discussed the identity of the Wakefield author and the date of the manuscript, as well as the dialect in which some of it was written. Concerning the Wakefield Master himself, he wrote:

The Wakefield playwright was no doubt a cleric or a man with clerical training, judging by his use of Latin and his Biblical knowledge. We are at liberty to guess that he was a subdeacon or a chantry priest, but there is little or no evidence on which to base such guesses ... His sympathy for the underdog, his sharpness of eye and tongue, his sense of humour, broad, hilarious and sometimes deliberately brutal - all these qualities force themselves on our attention. He is a man of many moods, amused and indignant, harsh and tender in turn. He has lived an uncloistered life, in which people, books and music have all played a part; his knowledge of men and their nature ranges from king to peasant ... he is an artist for whom life has meaning - a religious meaning.⁴⁶

Martin Stevens published a paper in 1981, in which he questioned the assumptions that had led to the belief that the nine line stanza was distinctive, and a distinctive characteristic of the Wakefield Master. He postulated, for instance that

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 243.

⁴⁵ *The Wakefield pageants in the Towneley cycle.* Ed. A.C. Cawley. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958. (*Old and Middle English texts*)

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. xxx-xxxii.

*all stanzas are primarily designed for the eye of the reader. While it is true that stanzas may add regularity to the aural structure of a long poem ... it is equally true that good poets as a general rule do not allow themselves to be read aloud in a string of equal units ... I defy anyone to "hear" the nine line stanza of the Wakefield Master when his plays are performed by professional actors ... the format of the stanza is a literary concern.*⁴⁷

He argues that the four line introduction to each stanza, should be recognized for what it is:

*Once we are able to recognize the four-line frons as a scribal and editorial accommodation, we are able to relate the Wakefield stanza to a good many other thirteeners, which, though they differ in the length of their lines, are the same in basic rhyme scheme.*⁴⁸

He concludes that

*we have further justification for regarding the nine-line Wakefield stanza to be the result of arbitrary scribal or editorial choice and not as an organic structure chosen for its formal design by the poet.*⁴⁹

This shift in interpretation of the length and number of lines was reflected in the recently-published and (as far as this is possible) definitive edition of the complete plays in the Towneley manuscript, edited by Stevens and the late A.C. Cawley.⁵⁰ In the introduction, they reconsider and re-interpret much of the research and discussion that has taken place over the past 100 years concerning the provenance of the

⁴⁷ Martin Stevens, *Did the Wakefield Master write a nine-line stanza?* In: *Contemporary drama*, 15 (1981-82) pp.100-101.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 108.

⁵⁰ *The Towneley plays*. Ed. Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley. Oxford: Early English Text Society/Oxford University Press, 1994. 2 vols.

manuscript, and of the works of the so-called Wakefield Master, and repeat Stevens' arguments for preferring a thirteen line stanza to a nine line stanza. Consequently, the thirteen line grouping is adopted for the Wakefield plays, in this edition. Concerning compilation and authorship, they conclude:

Although the extent of the Wakefield Master's authorship of the Towneley cycle is still a matter of conjecture, there is no question that he was the author of some of the finest pageants in the cycle.⁵¹

Stevens provides a fitting climax to this discussion, as not only does he place the existence of the Wakefield Master in perspective, but he also sums up his contribution to English literature in general, and to medieval drama in particular:

We do not know who the Wakefield Master was. We invented him to account for the remarkable poetry that he wrote, usually in the same metrical form, in many parts of the Towneley cycle. When we see him as the author of a thirteen-line stanza rather than the unique nine-liner that is usually attributed to him, we come to recognize that his basic measure was similar to parts that hitherto we might have hesitated in assigning to him ...we know him subjectively and sufficiently as the artist who brought a special voice to the Towneley cycle. He was master of the Yorkshire dialect and gave it a distinct literary dimension. He created a wide assortment of worldly and errant characters with Brueghel-like aspect, and through them he was able to project everyday life into sacred history. He had, above all, a complicated mind and a poetical vocabulary, extending from the rustic to the learned, which gave him the power to write about contemporary life in complex ironic structures. He gave us a panoramic view of human foibles and corrupt social institutions that tried but failed to challenge God's immutable truths. We need no constricting standards of objectivity to grant him his identity.⁵²

It would appear that, over 180 years after the Towneley manuscript first surfaced

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. xxxi.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 116-117.

at an auction sale, we are no nearer to knowing where it came from, or who the medieval author or authors were who wrote the plays that it contained. However, as a result of the study and research of scholars such as Pollard, Carey, Cawley, Stevens and others, we have a far greater understanding and appreciation of the genre of medieval drama, and of the milieu in which it germinated and blossomed. More importantly, however, the research related to the Towneley manuscript and the authorship of the Wakefield author has provided a case study of methodology which is a revelation and an example for others to follow. It is felt that not everything has been said on the subject of this document, and it is possible that one day in the future a manuscript or a record may be found hidden in a family archive or in a church library that may add to our knowledge and understanding of the very beginnings of English language and literature.

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