

THE SEALING OF THE TOMB: N.Town and its Context

Peter Meredith

The whole action of the setting of the watch over Christ's tomb occurs at the very end of the chapter of a single Gospel, and the sealing of the tomb appears almost as an afterthought in that same passage (Matthew 27:62-6). Pilate having been approached yet again by the princes, priests, and Pharisees, this time to make sure that Christ's body is not stolen away by the disciples in order to pretend that he has risen from the dead, as he foretold, tells them that as they have the means, they should go and set guards themselves; *illi autem abeuntes munierunt sepulchrum signantes lapidem cum custodibus* (Matthew 27:66; my emphasis). The Wycliffite Bible translation maintains the awkwardness and the imprecision of the Latin: 'Forsooth thei goynge forth, kepten the sepulchre, markinge the stoon, with keperis'; the Pepysian Gospel Harmony develops the idea a little but keeps to the word 'mark': 'And þe kni3ttes wenten forþ yarmed þo, and merkedon þe ston þat lay beforne þe entree'; but Tyndale, having likewise turned the parenthetic phrase into a main clause, makes the meaning specific, thereby giving the action the prominence which it had already often possessed: 'They went, and made the sepulcre sure with watche men, and sealed the stone'.¹ No phrase in the Gospels is going to be free of exegetical cross-referencing in the Middle Ages, especially when it can be linked with an image as rich as the sealed books of the Apocalypse (5:1, etc.), or as potentially rich as the fountain sealed in the Song of Songs (4:12) or the sealed door in Daniel (Daniel 14:10, etc), but the sealing of the tomb never becomes one of the key types.² For Bede, what is important is the irony that by sealing the tomb the Jews demonstrate Christ's power more clearly; the *Glossa Ordinaria* stresses the parallel between Christ's rising from the sealed tomb and being born of a virgin; and Ludolphus of Saxony, like Bede, sees irony, in that the Jews, by sealing the tomb, bear witness to the Resurrection.³ But the episode is not found, for example, in the *Biblia Pauperum* or in the extensive collection of types in the *Pictor in Carmine*.⁴

If we turn to the English plays, there is only one group that includes the setting of the watch *and* the sealing, N.Town. In York/Towneley, the

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words and actions of Annas and Cayphas relate simply to setting a watch to obviate any chance of the disciples stealing the body and pretending that Christ has risen, while in Chester they fear witchcraft being used to make believe Christ has risen, but again simply set a watch.⁵ This lack of concern with the secure closing of the tomb is apparent also in the treatment of the setting of the watch and the subsequent actions and reactions of the 'knights'. In York/Towneley there are four guards, and they simply sit on each side of the tomb — it is clearly envisaged as a table-top tomb. In Towneley, in an expansion of the York text on which it is otherwise quite closely based, the soldiers claim their own positions:

1 Miles Who shuld be where? fayn wold I wytt.
2 Miles Euen on this syde wyll I sytt.
3 Miles And I shall fownde his feete to flytt.

Towneley 26, lines 218–20

In Chester there are only three soldiers, but the same attention is paid to positioning:

And I shall nowe sett us soe,
yf that he ryse and would goe,
one of us, or elles two,
shall see of his upryste.
Stand thou there, and thou here,
and I myselfe in middle mere.

Chester 18, lines 146–51

This treatment leads to a sense of schoolboyish competition in Towneley and of military organisation in Chester, and to some extent in York, but more importantly distracts from the tomb itself.

The treatment of the Resurrection and of the waking of the soldiers similarly draws attention away from the closed tomb. In York there is little indication of the staging of the Resurrection. The soldiers settle and an enigmatic stage direction follows: *Tunc Jhesu resurgente* ('Then with Jesus rising' York 38, sd after line 186). Immediately afterwards the three Maries appear. The stone, they observe, has been 'putt beside' (line 230), the Maries see 'a zonge childe', dressed in white, sitting where they are going (line 225); they approach, and an English version of the *Quem quaeritis* dialogue with the single angel follows. In Towneley, generally speaking there is the same order of events, but instead of the simple statement of Christ's rising, there is a cue for music, *Tunc cantabunt angeli* ('Then the angels shall sing', sd after line 229), and then a very long speech by Jesus.