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Fox, Bull, and Lion in the Towneley *Coliphizacio*

John W. Velz

It is a substantial part of a century since Wyndham Lewis asserted that Shakespeare built political and philosophical literature out of morally and culturally significant oppositions between lions (chivalric naïfs) and foxes (Machiavellian main-chancers). Shakespeare's "lions" include Othello, Timon, Coriolanus, Troilus, Hector, and Hotspur—"simpletons" all, to use Lewis's word, and all but one of them soldiers—and his "foxes" include Iago, Apemantus, Aufidius, Thersites, Ulysses, and Falstaff, every man of them rather more alert than moral. Lewis asked us first to see that the dichotomy is between the naïf cultural values of the Middle Ages and the shrewd, even cynical attitude of the Machiavellian Renaissance that led to the rise of both science and capitalism; and secondly he asked us to agree that Shakespeare respects and identifies himself with the foxes more than he does with the lions.¹

Though the second point that Lewis makes, that Shakespeare likes foxes better than lions, ought to be debated, it will not be here; the quarrel in this article is with Lewis's first point: that medieval culture is leonine, monolithic, and childish, a fit victim for a clever Renaissance. Scholarship has come to see in the time since *The Lion and the Fox* that there was as much sophisticated light as naïve darkness in the Middle Ages; plenty of evidence can be marshaled to

¹ Wyndham Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Harper, 1927). Both these theses may seem to us naïve, but there is nevertheless much of value in this fascinating set of informal essays which touches also on Cervantes, Frederick the Great, and Nietzsche *inter alia*. The most significant point of relevance to our time has been overlooked, I believe, by the historians of literary theory: Lewis prefigures the New Historicists when he portrays Shakespeare's texts as thoroughly pervaded by the one-sided power struggle—shall we call it a "crisis" in Lawrence Stone's sense?—of Machiavelli's "modern" tough-mindedness against the vulnerable pieties of a bygone era.

show that Lewis was writing in ignorance of the true spirit of medievalism. There is a pleasing irony in the fact that the same *agon* Lewis detected between the renaissance Fox and the medieval Lion is inherent within medieval culture itself. Foxes have been played against lions from time immemorial; there is nothing so new about Shakespeare as Lewis would have us suppose.

Kenneth Varty's learned and extensively illustrated study of the fox in the Middle Ages shows that *vulpes* is an emblem for (not surprisingly) the Devil; for greed; and for hypocrisy.² In a widespread tradition traceable ultimately to Pierre de Saint Cloud's bawdy beast epic *Le Roman de Renard* (1175), Noble the Lion presides over the trial of Renard the Fox for alleged abuse of other animals and condemns him to death, though the sly criminal always escapes his fate, at least temporarily. Some English church carvings (e.g., Tilton-on-the Hill, Leicestershire; St. Helen's, West Keal, Lincolnshire) make clear that there was knowledge in England of the lion-and-fox lore.³ In chapter 4, "The Fox Religious," Varty shows that the preacher was often portrayed as a fox.⁴ Illustrations in his book include one (fig. 78) from Castle Hedingham in which "A monk dangles upside down from a stake shouldered by a fox indicating, no doubt, the complete subservience of the religious orders to all that the fox represents."

Such iconography and the variations of the folk epic of Renard and Noble were so ubiquitous in European culture in the late Middle Ages that it is not likely that the "Wakefield

² Kenneth Varty, *Reynard the Fox: A Study of the Fox in Medieval Art* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1967).

³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 43–58.

Master,” to whom the Towneley *Coliphizacio* is attributed, could have been ignorant of them. It seems apparent that in this play, the Buffeting of Christ before Annas and Caiaphas, he made use of the basic syndrome of confrontation between the dignified, judgmental, and all-powerful lion in a passive and undemonstrative role and the greedy, hypocritical fox who plays on the Devil’s side.⁵ And it seems plausible to believe that an early-fifteenth-century street audience in the West Riding (or wherever it might have been played) would perceive the folkloric pattern and make the application—even though the author in a fashion typical of him altered the pattern by intruding another beast character, a furious bull we may say, who in fact nearly runs away with the play.

In the Towneley *Coliphizacio* an almost totally silent but ultimately strong Christ is harassed by the vociferous worldlings, Annas and Caiaphas. This is a *leo fortis* who is for now paradoxically a passive victim. Anyone in a late-medieval audience who recalled the traditional lore springing from Pierre de St. Cloud would be prepared to make an interpretation of the play in cosmically ironic terms. The Lion remains Noble and very much the ultimate judge, though Renard the fox may escape execution for the time being. Yet there is more, because Annas and Caiaphas in this play are not alike in their opposition to Christ and what he stands for. Annas is a true medieval fox, a hypocritical cleric who is a legalist and shyster; Caiaphas is a brute, a thug, who would take the punishment of Christ into his own hands, quite literally, if Annas did not

⁵ An exegetical tradition stretching from early commentaries on four symbolic allusions in Revelations (esp. 5:5) to the *Narnia Chronicles* of C. S. Lewis has seen the lion as an emblem for Christ; the “Wakefield Master” could no more have been ignorant of this commonplace of biblical interpretation than he could have been ignorant of the legacy stemming from the *Roman de Renard*. One might say that vulpine iconography and folklore coalesced with biblical exegesis in the Towneley *Coliphizacio*.

restrain him.⁶ We may think of him as a bull in the postulated beast fable.

This simple play is almost entirely about the difference between these two enemies of God. They are, of course, as in Scripture, partners in their professional roles as Priests of the Temple.⁷ But here the similarity ends. Annas in this play is one who knows what the Old Testament Law allows him to do and is alert for a clause that will permit him to do away with this troublesome criminal Jesus. Caiaphas is utterly direct and stupidly impassioned, a foul-mouthed brute who is so coarse, so bloodthirsty, that one wonders how he ever was ordained. As the word *ordained* implies, and as one might expect, Annas and Caiaphas are both portrayed as medieval bishops, both of them wonderfully artistic anachronisms, evidence for a late-medieval audience of the anguishing need for reform of the priesthood of the Christian Church—a priesthood whose prototypes were evidence in Scripture and in the Wakefield Master's play of the anguishing need for Christ's reform of the priesthood of the Old Testament God.

There is a delicious comedy of evil in the conflict between the styles of the two clerics. After two torturers drive Jesus in like a draft animal on a farm, shouting abuse at him and

⁶ Paula Giuliano has called my attention to a similar contrast of personalities between the Annas and the Caiaphas of Arnoul Gréban's *Le mystère de la Passion* (mid-fifteenth century). It is Caÿphe who conducts the hostile interrogation of Jesus and who directs the torturers, while Anne makes the fine legalistic distinctions and remains somewhat aloof from the physical violence. See the edition of Omer Jodogne (Brussels: l'Académie royale de Belgique, 1965), 268–83 et passim. The contrast is stronger in the *Coliphizacio*.

⁷ Interestingly enough, the historical Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas (John 18:13), though the Towneley play neglects this potentially ironic touch. The best study of the Towneley *Coliphizacio* is J. W. Robinson's learned and sensitive analysis and commentary (with the corresponding play in the York cycle) which intersects with mine only occasionally. Robinson is particularly valuable in his seriatim account of the action with reconstruction of probable staging and his orderly presentation of scriptural background; see his posthumous *Studies in Fifteenth-Century Stagecraft*, Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Ser. 14 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 176–200.

alternately complaining that it has been a hard job haling their prisoner from Pilate's court to Caiaphas's, they make their report to Caiaphas; as they do so, they briefly recapitulate Jesus' ministry. When Caiaphas responds to them it immediately becomes apparent that he is as boorish, as bull-headed, as literal minded as these common louts are. The best moment early in the play comes when the Second Torturer relates that he heard Jesus say he could destroy the Temple and rebuild it on the third day. Caiaphas bursts out:

How myght that be trew?
It toke more aray!
The masons I knewe
That hewed it, I say,
So wyse,
That hewed ilka stone. (109–14)⁸

Caiaphas dominates the early going, as he ought to, being Chief Priest for the year (John 18:13). The dramatist made a witty choice when he picked the Chief Priest to be the stupid bull and his subordinate the more intelligent fox. (Despite what David Bevington says about this,⁹ there is very little to choose between them in Scripture.) Eventually Caiaphas turns to Christ and browbeats him (183ff), eliciting no response at all. This infuriates Caiaphas who rants on for more than fifty lines of invective, laced with insults (Christ is a harlot, was a foundling, can't be a king as he has no horse, and so forth). As he gets more excited he adds scatological expletives

⁸ [Quotations from and line numbering in the *Coliphizacio* are from Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley, *The Towneley Plays*, EETS, s.s. 13–14 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), substituted for the text from A. C. Cawley's *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958). Professor Velz's original spelling of the names of the high priests, following Cawley's 1958 edition, has been retained.—Ed.]

⁹ David Bevington, ed., *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 536.

(“in a torde” [215], “the dwillys durt in thi berd” [246], and so forth), as the enemies of God almost always do in medieval plays;¹⁰ in medieval literature scatology is the hallmark of the Devil.

Annas finally interrupts this bullying tirade, which he obviously finds embarrassing, and urges a subtler, more crafty approach to the silent Jesus. And from here on the play is a struggle between Caiaphas, half crazed with desire to strike Jesus, and his oily-smooth partner, Annas, who has all he can do with mild remonstrance to restrain his raging companion. Blustering and shouting all the way, Caiaphas boasts of his position in life, hints at taking a bribe if Jesus were to offer one, and expresses anxiety that Pilate may take a bribe to let Jesus off. But most of all he yearns for violence, and all this while Annas counters him with “the law”:

CAIAPHAS. Shall I neuer ete bred
To that he be stald
In the stokys.
ANNAS. Sir, speke soft and styll;
Let vs do as the law will.
CAIAPHAS. Nay, I myself shall hym kill,
And murder with knobys. (293–99)

Such insatiable craving for violence in this play is not extraordinary, though it is excessive; it appears first in the Towneley plays in the character of Cain. Remembering this, we can perhaps gain some insight into the artistic impulse that led the Wakefield Master to add a bull to his fox and lion.

Annas, in his insistence on a non-violent approach to the interrogation of Christ, may

¹⁰John W. Velz, “Scatology and Moral Meaning in Two English Renaissance Plays,” *South Central Review* 1 (1984): 4–21, esp. 4–8.

seem to speak for human decency and for a view of the Law as a necessary restraint on human passions. Indeed, when Annas takes over the interrogation for Caiaphas, Jesus speaks six lines of reply to him (363–68), the only speech he makes in all the 650-line play. And yet it becomes gradually clear that Annas is a true fox, one who sees the Law as a cloak for his malice, one for whom there is no spirit to the Law, only the letter. He knows the Hebraic Law and quotes it more than once in Latin, notably the injunction that it is not lawful for the Court of the High Priest of the Temple to put any man to death (John 18:31). Yet he wants the condemnation of Jesus no less than Caiaphas does and sees a way to attain that end and still remain within the Law: let Pilate and his temporal Court do the judging and condemning and executing, and keep the Priests' hands clean. Annas is reminiscent of a certain foxy type to be found in most armies, a man who means no good but experiences no harm because he is so scrupulously cautious about staying inside the pale of Government Regulations, which like the Old Testament Law were written originally to codify the spirit of "the good" but descend ultimately into hollow letter-of-the-law rubrics.

The struggle between the fox and the bull goes on in the play, including such comedy as Annas's repeated reminder that it is unbecoming a clergyman to use violence toward a prisoner and Caiaphas's eventual bitter reply:

He that fyrst made me clerk
And taght me my lare
On bookys for to barke —
The dwill gyf him care!
. . .
Els myght I haue made vp wark
Of yond harlot and mare. . . . (443–44, 449–50)

But there are consolations; a layman can strike where a clergyman cannot:

But certys, or he hens yode,
It wold do me som good
To see knyghtys knok his hoode
With knokys two or thre. (452–55)

And at this point Annas shows some bully beneath his fox. Once a technicality in the law seems to take the shadow of illegality from him, it is *he* who summons the two torturers to their sadistic duty:

Syr, as ye haue hast,
It shal be, I traw.
Com and make redy fast,
Ye knyghtys on a raw,
Youre arament;
And that kyng to you take,
And with knokys make hym wake. (460–65)

But the grim satire is not finished, for Caiaphas regrets deeply that he cannot join in with the torturers and eggs them on with technical advice that is the height of black comedy. The torturers and their servant Froward carry out the torture for well over one hundred lines in the form of a brutal game which, like the play itself, is highly serious beneath its ludic guise. And when Froward the servant boy quarrels with his fellow torturers, we get as a reprise an echo of the disagreement (that is the play) between the fox and the bull about methods of dealing hostilely with the lion, Jesus. The play ends with Caiaphas's reproach to Annas for keeping him from stabbing Jesus to the heart with a dagger. Annas yet once more expresses his opinion that it is a shame to talk that way. But Caiaphas is not listening; he still has vicarious pleasure to attain:

I will not dwell in this stede,

Bot spy now thay hym lede,
And persew on his dede.
Fare well! we gang, men. (647–50)

So brutal Caiaphas gets the last word in this Gothic play. Though the fox Annas has been in restraining control most of the way, the bull Caiaphas has been the energizing force in the action. Perhaps it is all emblematic: Pilate will play both fox and bull in what follows through the rest of the Passion.

It is the Wakefield Master's brilliant innovation to set up a lion and fox confrontation of a kind that his audience would find familiar (and indeed that Lewis might well have understood) between Jesus and the High Priests and their torturers, and then to shift the focus away from the scriptural *agon* between the *leo fortis* and his enemies to a dramatically powerful and morally significant struggle between a bull and a fox among those enemies.

John Velz retired as Professor of English Emeritus at the University of Texas, Austin. His numerous publications were focused on medieval drama and Shakespeare, whose indebtedness to classical literature was a specialty. The present essay was published in The Early Drama, Art, and Music Review, 14 (Fall 1991): 1-10. Omitted here is a final, very long footnote, which is exclusively a comment on Shakespeare (pp. 8-10).