

## **Tormentors in Passion Play: Connections with Traditional Midsummer Play**

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There is one kind of Traditional Drama which did not survive into the 20th century, and that is the playing of games around the time of the peak and then fall of the sun. The 21st June is the date of the highest point: but dawn of the 24th was the day of commemoration because it was the moment when the fall could be perceived from any place with a clear view of the horizon. The sun, of course, was a key symbol of power and the moment of its fall had meaning. John Beletth said in 1162: St John's eve is celebrated by both Christians and pagans because it holds allegorical and ritualistic significance.

Bonfires on St John's Eve are well known, but what is new is the evidence showing how central insults and slander were to gatherings at this time. As Sloth says in Passus 5 of *Piers Plowman* he does not enjoy the Bible as much as 'a harlotyre or a somer game of (shoemakers)/ Or lesynges to laughen of and bilye my neghebores'. And a Tretise by Wyclif mentions 'summer games of tormentors' as an example of 'the rough populace [jesting] on the vigil of the Baptist's birth' (midsummer eve), when 'the mob [indulged] in disorderly behaviour throughout the vigil on St John's Night:' The activities involved in at this day were rather more than reverential waiting for the sun to rise.

Perhaps there is nothing surprising in the verbal aggression. Many early traditions did involve insults and rough treatment. It could be that mumming performances -- and our textual examples only begin in the 18th century -- are an exception. At Christmas, in the Middle Ages, people might elect a fool king to be insulted and at hock-tide, flytings between men and women of a community were also cause for laughter. Midsummer games simply followed the trend with an emphasis on the liberty to be as defamatory as you could, within your class as with Sloth above, or across social classes, if you could get away with it, either telling lies about people for fun in a small society where everyone knew everything about each other anyway, or attacking those in power above you. In societies where free speech was very limited, if you had a chance to indulge it you might want to let rip.

What has interested Medieval Theatre people are the sermons from different parts of England in which the torturing of Christ in Mystery plays is also called a somer game with 'tormentors'. Siegfried Wenzel's translation of one extract reads:

I knew where there was once a somergame. One person was Christ, another Peter, another Andrew, some were tormentors, and some the devils. Christ was stretched out, crucified and beaten, mocked and held a fool. He was hungry and thirsty and no-one gave him anything but strokes and scorn.

Wenzel wondered, then, whether Sloth's preference was in fact to watch the 'guild performance of a play', noting that it is hard to describe Mystery plays as harlotrye. However, he omits the second of Sloth's lines with its 'lies to laugh about', -- this element of malicious fun comes close to the conclusion of Wenzel's extract on the somer game of Christ

And whoever knew how to torment and scorn [Christ] best was reckoned to play the best.

So, I would like to approach the question the opposite way round and begin by identifying more midsummer games in which the fun was personal abuse: lies, unpleasant truths, scorning or mocking people. Some of the strongest material comes from across the channel -- and French Passion plays had even longer sections in which Christ was tormented. It was this fact which many French critics have found unacceptable about their medieval religious theatre.

The most conclusive evidence of slander being incorporated as a planned part of seasonal game comes from Verdun in the 15th century, where the Cathedral Chapter allowed its clergy to hold a festival of St John on 24 June. In 1498 two men were entrusted to put on the game because they undertook to do it 'honourably, without making slanders.' Again, in 1501 clerics were allowed the fete on the promise they would not include slander. The fact that the Chapter anticipated the problem, trying to weed out the possibility ahead of the event indicates that slander was the custom between 23rd and 24 June. In both years the clerics were chosen because they were not lay members of the church, both were under orders, so it was expected that they could be trusted. Yet, having the promise repeated suggests that each time it was not kept. An example of what the slander might involve comes from Metz not far from Verdun. On the eve of St John, 1512, a priest was thrown into the Town Hall jail for 24 hours for calling Lord Nicol Remiat, a liar. He would have been released immediately had he asked the Lord's pardon but he replied that he could do without his pardon. It would seem that this priest had a grievance against the Lord, and he did not unduly fear uttering it on the Eve of St John. The fact that he was let off so lightly for defaming one of the aristocracy, and the fact that the diarist found it worth recording, suggest that this was a time when it was customary to dare to assume such liberties.

One of the reasons for the liberty at this time could well have been the Baptist's own truth-telling to Herod -- but for which he paid the full price. Yet, in Troyes on 24 June 1611 A fool in Troyes in 1611, elected by the town to speak out on 24 June against an injustice, began by saying, 'It is no longer the time for pretending', And Martin Luther sent off his more personal attack against the Pope, signed on the Eve of St John. He began by writing, 'the time for silence is past.'

There is a stronger explanation as to why French youths could get away with a liberty for which the Baptist lost his head. The explanation is to do with the seasons of life on Fortune's wheel. There were varying numbers given to these-- we have Jacques' 9 Ages of man and in this (**Fig 1 – Wheel of Fortune**) we have a breakdown into smaller stages between the main ones: which were Four : obvious seasons, Spring (childhood), Summer (youth), Autumn (maturity) and Winter (old age/death). In some of the literature of the time a joke is made out of the expectation that as man (and it usually was man) reached each stage, his character suddenly changed. Youths in England reached their summit in summer - both words from the Latin for the highest place -- all very appropriate and the summit of hills tended to be used to illustrate their temporary, seasonal elevation. Youths in France reached their été or hot season in été,

and this seems to have excused bad behaviour from young men in France - when given its liberty at the appropriate season of the year. There are a number of works explaining the inevitability of this hot-headedness: coming out as hasty-tempered, thoughtless in speech and suffering from poor-judgement. Mentally-speaking, young men were still children; physically they were adult, with all the dangers the two combined, and the best they could do was confess regularly so that if they died suddenly (as they were prone to do, being careless of danger) they would not be damned. (This is all from Philippe de Navarre.)

The author, Michaut Taillevant wrote of the summer season of life: 'He is then so hot that he sweats. It is Youth (Jeunesse) the time when a man boils'. The inevitability allowed youths to celebrate their flaws at the summer season of the year -- particularly at the highest point, St John's Day.

The wheel of life, of course is also the wheel of Fortune -- ruled by her and once you reach the top, you have to come down. In de Brailles Wheel of Life it is Fortune shown turning it. (**Fig 2 – Wheel of Life**)

Michaut Taillevant again puts it quite simply: he said when he first became a youth 'Fortune did not trouble him and his hot or boiling years were spent outside all rule and compass, because his youthful expectation was always to live in joy and wealth, but a new tune was heard at the St. John. A fall in life was appropriate at 24 June, connected with John the B. St John was famous for his line about Christ: 'he will increase but I will decrease.' John's fame declined, once Christ was recognised as the Christ. before the 4th century AD, Fortune had been commemorated on 24 June, the day when her changes can be seen. From the 4th century on, she was still perceived to be there, hiding behind the rags of the Baptist, as Taillevant's poem shows. 'Fortune did not trouble him until the Saint Jean.'

The heat allowed to young men, and the potential for power to fall demonstrated by the sun, combined to give a space for some quite outrageous attacks in France on those in power. As someone called Claud de Rubys, writing about Lyon said of the high summer period: 'after much drinking [the people] stamp their feet under the table . . . they pull to pieces the king, princes, governor, the State and the legal system. They write scandalous and defamatory leaflets which they pin up at crossroads or pass around in the streets.' Although he called such customs, the 'seeds of sedition' they were permitted: 'for fear that holding [the people] in too rigid a discipline will result in desperation.'

From Lyon in 1466 comes a possible example of one of these leaflets. A man, called Jean LeDoulx was arrested on Sunday 29 June and was charged with conspiracy in a plot to murder Louis XI because of a paper found on him, which described his death. He escaped from the king's prison in early July and was sheltered in Lyon Cathedral for 2 months, while angry letters arrived from Paris. What suggests that this was part of a scandalous game is that the people called him 'Fortune'. When the case was discussed by Lyons' magistrates, they wrote of him not as Jean LeDoulx but as 'the an called Fortune'. The people turned the scandal into a game by associating the assassination of a real king at midsummer with the most extreme fall from fortune, and Jean LeDoulx Fortune's surrogate. And the Cathedral where Jean was hiding was consecrated to St John the Baptist. It is also recorded that he offered to give himself up on 28 August. This was the Eve of the Baptist's other commemorative day -- this time for his beheading. Again it looks like a playful gesture, for Jean was persuaded to return to sanctuary just as the king's officers arrived. If he had been recaptured he would have

lost his life. But in terms of traditional play, this has quite a potent meaning, since it engages with real politics: a humble youth in Lyon can get away with provoking a king whom many loved to hate. It provided a public drama for the whole town, while summer lasted. In September, everyone except Louis tried to forget about the incident.

Other examples of this kind of lie are referred to as a game of 'epitaphs'. The year before Jean Ledoulx's the same had already been played against Louis XI in the cathedral of Angers, (the year when Louis attempted to appropriate Anjou by force and had failed.). A mass was held, close after midsummer, for the dead Louis and his Mother, Mary. Louis XI's Mother was Mary of Anjou. In all these examples, so far, the insults were directed at figures who were not present, also in Metz in 1512.

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The more violent form of slander is to people who are actually present and this can become *charivari*, which de Rubys wrote were the first choice in Lyons: if *charivari* were banned, he wrote, then the drink-inspired attacks on the system banning them were turned to instead. *Charivari* could be either against the breaking of marital codes (as Tom Pettitt has recently explored). But there were political verities. In war, they could take the form of triumphs over a fallen enemy or against individual political figures, also fallen from power. In Froissart's Chronicles there are several examples of military derision against an enemy defeated on the eve or the day of the St John. In 1372, 24 June, when the Spanish sailed from la Rochelle after a successful battle 'they let loose a great noise of horns, trumpets, muses, cornets and tambourines -- a raspberry to the defeated English troupes who had to 'take their chance, as God or fortune sent.'

The most striking example, however, is against an individual and happened in Laon in 1587.

Laon is spectacularly seated on a rock which rises out of the North French plain, and in the 16th century, when the town had not spread beyond the top, its elevation was even more striking. (**Fig 3 – Laon**) In January 1587 a rebellion began which was to last for six years and the town governed itself during this time. A figure they had to decide what to do with right at the beginning was the King's representative, Prévôt Martin. Instead of murdering him he was put in prison round about Easter, and on 24 June, soon after 1 am, he was brought out, dressed up in the furred gown of his previous office, legs garroted under the horse he was placed on and a fairground rope tied round his robes. Extra torches and lanterns were brought out so that the citizens could witness his discomfort. Townspeople given preference were those who provided evidence of failings of the fallen regime: priests' mistresses and their children. As Prévôt Martin was led away downhill the audience shouted their curses and 'enjoyed the reversal in estate to which he was reduced on leaving them.'

The fall from Fortune was marked by his geographical descent to the plain below. It further appears, from the timing of bringing him out of prison that he left about dawn: The moment with allegorical significance. And the jeering and curses, as he is paraded on horseback turn the event into *charivari*. What I particularly like about this, from a theatrical point of view, is that it staged the political realities of the moment. The king's power also waned when his representative was led away humiliated, downhill, while the citizens' power in the ascendant, remained in the high geographical position. The Jean LeDoulx affair in Lyons had played out an attitude towards feudal rule, but this play furthered the process of political change. And none of our 20th c. political theatre was able to do that.

[The *charivari* mockery of Prévôt Martin's descent in fortune and mocking his pretensions to power -- dressed up in a furred gown for the game, has something in common with the treatment of Christ in The Passion plays and Mystery Plays; which were also put on in summer.]

But, firstly, in the 1930s, Arnoul van Gennepe found more harmless, similar customs in the mountainous regions around Lyon. Again these call to mind the treatment of Christ. In several villages the herdsmen took part in a race to the highest pasture, to arrive before dawn on 24 June. The last to arrive was called the *litchbirrier* -- butterlicker, and in some places this man was crowned with a stinking weed -- pisschien -- In the evening he was led downhill on an ass, facing the tail. *Charivari* continued through the village. Here there was no transgression of social codes: but the John the Baptist quality of arriving last was turned into a form of public humiliation, for fun! Clearly, for this to be fun also for the man humiliated, an understanding of the seasonal meaning had to be there and this seems to have been the reason why we have lost such midsummer games. Even in the 1930s van Gennepe said that hilltop regions were more likely to have held onto the bonfire burning, and wheel rolling traditions, than elsewhere. One might say that these regions are also more isolated: local thinking can remain unchallenged by more civilised? forms of thinking. Some of the strongest regions for the survival of winter drama have been rural.

What appears in these French *charivari* which relate to the midsummer ethos is the pure enjoyment of being insulting: [and this was what critics of the French passion plays found so difficult to accept in the tormenting of Christ]

(In the Towneley, note that 'Caiaphas names Christ as "King Copyn in oure game" - translates as 'king jester' the leader of the traditional games. One tormentor also calls him a 'fond fool' who is given a seat as throne for 'a lord of renowne.' Also 'a new play of Yuill'. So identified as a Christmas game. The rise and fall of winter fool kings was also explicitly part of a mocking sequence in the Oxford Christmas Entertainments at St John's College, in 1607.)

Of the British extant Mystery Plays, performed at Corpus Christi, in this high summer period: the York and the Chester provide examples closest to midsummer game and very like the treatment in van Gennepe's records. In the York buffeting (Lytsteres and Tyllemakers) Christ is called a man chosen 'in his kith where he comes froo' and is crowned with the crown of thorns, and treated as a seasonal figure elected to be humiliated. While the scourging takes place he is called a king 'without kingdom, supporters or land.' A man whose claim to power is an absurd contrast to the reality. The text that we have of the Chester plays is interesting as it is one written to be performed on midsummer day. A fall from Fortune game is played in the Shepherds' play while, in the Trial of Christ, the figure of Christ, unusually puts forward the Christian alternative of kingship in a heavenly sphere. But he too is treated to a festive *charivari* in the mock 'coronation' in which added to the crown of thorns and sceptre is a stinking ointment.

In French Passion plays the tormentors are more extensive in their ridicule. In one they look for a theatrical costume for Christ: 'the vilest king's costume that can be found . . . an old purple gown full of holes . . . more tattered than an old rag.' to be added to the sceptre and crown of thorns. [Another, based on it, and played at the end of August, ended just before the decollatio of St John the Baptist. As well as the vile king's dress, the torturers call Christ king of the suffering, king of cowards and king of unfortunates. The last is a word with strong midsummer associations. ]

The implications of the soldiers treating Christ in this way are complex. On the one hand, low-class men speak what they think is the truth about the pretensions of a jumped-up leader, whose change in worldly fortune is satirised in play. Yet, on the one hand the tormentors carry out God's purpose. Also, from the Christian point of view, is the fact that in the Chester play and in the French text of August 1486, Christ demonstrates the powerlessness of Fortune for those whose minds are focused on non-material rewards.

So, to return to the English sermons with descriptions of summer game in which One person was Christ, another Peter, another Andrew, some were tormentors, and some the devils. These appear to be examples of preachers engaging the interest of their congregations by approaching moral issues, through Traditional theatre. The inclusions in the religious Plays themselves would seem to have a very similar purpose. There is one line in the sermon anecdote which reads: 'And whoever knew how to torment and scorn [Christ] best was reckoned to play the best,' The judgement is taken from the point of view of those undertaking the mocking play. In the secular examples, the ability to be inventively abusive could have been open to peer judgement, resulting in the election of one as king of the game. This would have provided a spur to those involved to be more and more outrageous.

#### **Sources**

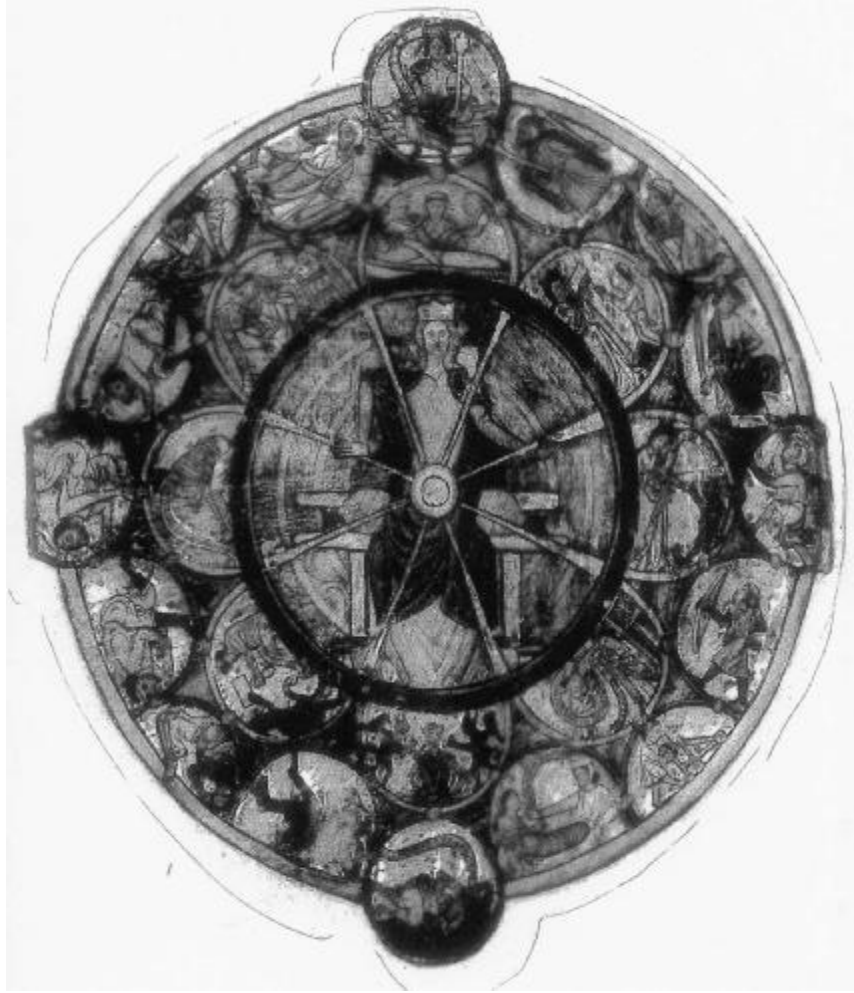
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For the Wheel of Life, see J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986)



Figure 1 – Wheel for Fortune, French, c.1406



**Figure 2 – William de Braille’s Wheel of Life**



**Figure 3 – Laon, c.1594. *Topographia Galliae*, not paginated**