# The First Perugian Passion Play: Aspects of Structure

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One of the most valuable documents for studying the origins and development of vernacular drama in Italy and in all of western Europe is the fourteenth century laudario of the Confraternity of St. Andrew in Perugia. The laude in this collection were sung by members of the lay society when they gathered in their oratory to meditate on the passion of Christ, administer their works of charity, and practice self-flagellation in common. Similar groups of lay men and women, called disciplinati because of the adoption of the disciplina, or small scourge, into their devotional ritual, sprang up all over Europe after the movement initiated by Raniero Fasani had spread out from Perugia in the spring of 1260 in a chain-reaction of penitential processions that reached as far as Poland.<sup>1</sup> In marked contrast to the enthusiastic excesses of the movement's origin, the numerous confraternities founded in its wake were notable for their conservatism and orthodoxy, especially in their early years. And, for reasons yet to be fully explained, within the circle of these lay confraternities vernacular drama began to flourish in late medieval Italy. The laudarî that have survived well document this theatrical tradition.

A typical *laudario* might contain both lyric and dramatic *laude*, the former being, generally speaking, vernacular hymns of praise to God, the Virgin Mary, or a saint. A dramatic *lauda*, on the other hand, could be anything from a simple narrative in dialogue form sung during the private gatherings of the confraternity, to a complex musical drama performed publicly. Such dramatic works were composed in either of two characteristic verse stanzas: the *sestina semplice*, whose verses numbered eight or nine syllables and rimed *ababcc*, was employed for penitential

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occurrences and sung *ad modum passionalem*; the *ballata maggiore* stanza of alternating septenaries and hendecasyllables riming *aBaBbCcX* was sung *ad modum paschalem* on Sundays and joyous feasts. The Latin phrases indicating passional or paschal mode are generally considered to refer to the melodies, perhaps of liturgical origin, to which the stanzas were sung. These melodies have not survived.

The St. Andrew laudario contains the fullest, most authentic selection of extant dramatic laude. In its present state it forms the second part of MS. 955 (già Giustizià 5) of the Biblioteca Augusta in Perugia, the first part consisting of the Confraternity's statutes dated 1374. The laudario proper was transcribed around 1350,2 although some works give evidence of having been composed a good deal earlier.<sup>3</sup> Its 76 parchment leaves contain 117 lyric and dramatic laude, five of which are repeated for a total of 122 texts. The first 109 compositions take their subject matter from and are arranged according to the occurrences of the liturgical year, beginning with Christmas Day and ending with the Vigil of Christmas. Usually, lyric laude are shorter than dramatic ones; a lyric work can have as few as 24 verses, a dramatic one as many as 468. The former are generally assigned to lesser occurrences, the latter to Sundays and important feasts. Every day of Lent has its own dramatic lauda which follows closely the gospel of the day; many of these are brief, but as Holy Week approaches they lengthen and become fully "theatricalized." Laude 110-20, all lyric, are for the dead, and 121 seems to fit no category at all: it concerns the Perugians whose punishment seems imminent because of their sins. A fragment concludes the codex.

The two Good Friday plays in this collection represent the first fully developed vernacular passion plays in Italy. The first of these deserves special attention, being the longest work in the St. Andrew *laudario* and among the most complex. It not only exhibits many interesting traits characteristic of this early drama, but also blends together scriptural, devotional, lyrical, and, perhaps, liturgical influences with conscious artistic purpose. The anonymous author's careful combination of literary modes and his use of a skillful and complex transitional passage contribute to the play's structural and aesthetic unity.

The first passion play is entitled Singnore scribe from its opening words addressed to the "Honorable scribes," probably

by a pharisee, but the text does not make this clear.4 It dramatizes events from Holy Thursday evening when Judas is shown making his bargain with the priests, to late Good Friday morning when Christ sets out for Calvary. Unlike the two notable passion plays possibly related to it within the Italian tradition, the earlier Latin Montecassino *Passion* and the later Roman work spectacularly presented in the Colosseum, this Perugian *lauda* portrays neither Christ's crucifixion nor his death. It is followed in the manuscript by *Quista vesta*, the second passion play in the St. Andrew collection, which opens with the scene of the three soldiers casting lots for Christ's garments at the foot of the cross where he hangs already dead.

Singnore scribe exhibits a most important characteristic of the earliest Perugian drama: while the action of the play achieves full dramatic development, it nevertheless maintains a close fidelity to the gospel narrative. Ignazio Baldelli observes that the play, "proprio per il suo procedere evangelico . . . da una parte, e dall'altra per la sua struttura tutta teatralizzata, si riconnette a quella parte del laudario perugino più assolutamente originale"5 ("precisely because its action proceeds as in the gospel accounts . . . on the one hand, and on the other because of its fully theatricalized structure, belongs to that part of the Perugian laudario most genuinely original"). Elsewhere in the same article Baldelli affirms that the play follows step by step the gospel of the day, that is, the Passion according to John assigned to the liturgy of Good Friday; and, that even the ordering of the dramatic episodes is scriptural.6 Now, while these things are so for the greater number of scenes, there are notable exceptions. For example, incidents from John's account are omitted, and some are borrowed from other evangelists, such as the payment of thirty coins to Judas (vv. 31-34) alluded to by the three synoptics (Mt 26.15; Mc 14.11; Lc 22.5), and Christ before Herod (ll. 253-64, from Lc 23.8-12).7 Because of dramatic need events are at times portrayed in violation of scriptural chronology and sequence. Verses 1-54, for example, represent a satisfying compression of events that take place in the gospels at different times shortly before the Passover, depicting as they do the plotting of the chief priests and pharisees to bring about Christ's death, and Judas' pact with them. In the play all this occurs on Thursday evening. In the play, furthermore, Peter denies Christ near the court of Pilate during

the scourging, while all four evangelists record the denial as taking place in Caiaphas' courtyard when Christ is first brought before the Chief Priest (Mt 26.69; Mc 14.66; Lc 22.55; Jn 18.18). Since Singnore scribe does not include the agony of Christ on the cross, and since significant events of great dramatic potential happened during that time, such events are portrayed, but out of scriptural sequence. So, for example, Christ recommends his mother to John while they are still at Pilate's court (vv. 391-96).

Singnore scribe divides into two parts, the first consisting of rather straightforward enactment of the scriptural narrative; scenes are often brief, three of them composed of only twelve verses. Dramatic action, at times hurried and violent, moves urgently from sedes to sedes: the courts of Caiaphas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod, all possibly indicated by simple thrones; the Cenacle where the women are gathered; and Mt. Olivet. Pilate's court and movement toward and away from it account for 192 verses of the play, more than any other location. A pillar is located near this sedes, as is the fire near which Peter will warm himself. It usually takes a strophe or less of dialogue, at times no dialogue at all, for characters to get from one place to another, and such movement affords ample opportunity for silent mime. The frequent use of the verbs menare and ducere in both text and stage directions, especially in the first part, stresses the processional quality of the play which concludes as Christ sets out for Calvary. In the second part of the play, one relatively long scene stretches out for 120 verses, containing very little action, filled instead with the lyric lamentation of Christ himself, Mary, John, Magdalen, and the Sisters. Scriptural drama blends here with influences from the devotional Meditations on the Life of Christ attributed to St. Bonaventure,8 and from the vernacular tradition of the lyric lament.

The first part of the play contains three Latin passages, two of which occur also in the Montecassino *Passion*, and suggest the possibility of a slight textual relationship. The first passage occurs only in the St. Andrew play, but is recalled here for purposes of comparison: as Christ begins his agonized prayer on Mt. Olivet, at verse 72, he repeats the "Tristis est anima mea usque ad mortem;/ Sustinete hic et vigilate mecum" recorded by both Matthew and Mark (26.38; 14.34). Later in the same scene, at verse 127, Christ asks the Jews who have come for

his capture, first in the Perugian dialect: "Cuie andate voie cercando?" When they answer-"Quil Iesu ch'è messo en bando"-he declares: "Io so' esso." This exchange is then immediately repeated in the Latin of Jn 18.4-5, all the Jews having fallen to the ground at Christ's first questioning: "Christus eis: 'Quem queritis?' Et Iudei: 'Iesum Nazarenum.' Christus: 'Ego sum'." Concerning this Quem queritis passage, Baldelli observes the following: "La lauda Segnore scribe serve anche a precisare i rapporti della lauda drammatica dei flagellanti col teatro liturgico medievale, in quanto vi troviamo inserite al loro luogo evangelico . . . le battute: Quem queritis? Ihesum Nazarenum. Ego sum. Il tropo famoso, come è noto, è stato desunto da questo punto della Scrittura ed applicato alla Visitatio sepulcri: comunque, l'inserzione, sia pure al loro posto evangelico, di quelle battute potrebbe essere suggerita dal ricordo del Quem queritis del tropo del sepolcro."9 Now, while it is very possible that the passage may have been suggested to the author of the vernacular lauda by its occurrence in an Easter sepulchre trope where it replaces the angel's unanswerable "Quid quaeritis viventem cum mortuis?" recorded by Luke alone (24.5), it is also possible that the suggestion came from or was influenced by an analogous use of the phrase "quem quaeritis" that appears in the Montecassino Passion in the Mt. Olivet capture scene where Christ says to the *loricati*: "Venientes cum lanternis/ armis fustibus lucernis/ dicite quem quaeritis" (vv. 43-45).10

The third Latin phrase in Singnore scribe opens the scene depicting Peter's denial, somewhere near Pilate's court during Christ's scourging. The stage direction reads: "Iudei ligantes Iesum ad colupnam; tunc dicit ancilla ad Petrum sedentem ad ignem" (stage direction after v. 276). The Jews bind Christ to the column, and attention is abruptly directed to a nearby scene which gives no evidence of its being in view of the scourging. Peter sits near a fire and a servant girl declares: "Tu cum Iesu Galileo/ Giù nell'orto stave ier sera" (vv. 277-78). The first phrase is Latin, the second vernacular, although both form part of the same sentence. The exact Latin phrase occurs in the Montecassino Passion at verse 103, where Peter's denial takes place in proper scriptural order near Caiaphas' court much before Christ's scourging. The servant girl cries out against Peter and says: "Tu cum Iesu galileo/ eras [inqua]m tu cum eo/ [vi]di sine dubio" (vv. 103-05). There are no close verbal

echoes in the remainder of the two analogous scenes, however, and both authors may well have independently remembered the phrase from Mt 26.69: "Et tu cum Iesu Galilaeo eras." Then too, the more one studies the phrase in the context of the vernacular *Singnore scribe*, the more one feels moved to interpret what appears to be a Latin phrase from the Vulgate as a vernacular phrase in the fourteenth century Perugian dialect, containing two Latinisms, one common, *Iesu*, one not unknown, *cum*, and an uninflected proper adjective, *Galileo*. Especially since the two clearly Latin passages are extra-stanzaic, and the phrase in question is incorporated into the metrics and rime scheme of the vernacular stanza, does this seem so.

The question of the relationship between Singnore scribe and the Montecassino Passion is not, of course, limited to a consideration of such verbal parallels; much larger issues extend beyond the scope of this study. And, however interesting it is to ascertain the vernacular play's ties with such an illustrious predecessor, so much more important is it to discover and appreciate the skill whereby the anonymous Perugian author combined the influences of the varying traditions he drew upon into one artistic whole. Nowhere in the play can we better discover this than in the transitional sequence that begins with the stage direction recalled above. Pilate has just given the command: "Frustatel forte a la colonda/ Desfin ch'el sangue a terra 'bonda" (vv. 275-76). The stage direction follows: "Iudei ligantes Iesum ad colupnam; tunc dicit ancilla ad Petrum sedentem ad ignem." It can justly be supposed that, once having bound Christ to the column, the Jews then execute Pilate's command to scourge him. But no stage direction indicates this, no "scene" depicts the scourging, no dialogue reveals that it is being carried out. Valuable information concerning the staging of this scene is, however, furnished by the inventories of theatrical furnishings possessed by the Confraternity of St. Dominic,11 considered one of the three "great" Perugian confraternities together with those of St. Francis and St. Augustine. The proximity of these three prestigious groups, their early foundation dates between 1317 and 1320,12 and the homogeneity of the early Perugian dramatic tradition allow one justly to assume their direct influence on such smaller local confraternities as St. Andrew's, to whom they may well have lent props, costumes, and other furnishings, perhaps even playbooks. The earliest entries in the

St. Dominic inventories pertinent to the scourging scene are for the year 1339: items 78 and 79 mention "una colonda penta" and "doie fruste," respectively. More specific information is given for the year 1386 where item 58 reads: "Ancho una colonda, a la quale se lega Cristo al tempo de la sua passione, e doie fruste," and item 41: "Ancho una vesta encarnata de cuoio da Cristo e colle calze de cuoio encarnate." The garment and stockings of flesh-colored leather provided not only for the theatrical violence of the scourging scene, but also for the nudity of the main character. Whoever informs Mary of her son's capture stresses the fact that Pilate has had him stripped *nudo nudo* for the scourging (v. 311). Magdalen, too, twice laments the nudity of Christ in her speech "O maestro mio cortese" (vv. 379-90) soon after the scourging has taken place.

The Perugian tradition, then, clearly gave careful attention to the scourging scene when it staged the passion, and this was surely the case in the St. Andrew play under consideration. Yet, immediately after Pilate gives his command "Frustatel forte . . ." attention is drawn to a quick succession of three brief scenes that take place elsewhere in the acting area: Peter denies Christ and goes off weeping, exclaiming that he wants to "get on [his] horse and go away"; Judas returns the silver pieces to the priests and, despairing, goes off to hang himself. Then follows a scene reminiscent of that described in Chapter LXXV of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ:* "someone" goes to the place where Mary and the Sisters are gathered, probably the cenacle from which Christ and his disciples departed to go to Mt. Olivet in Scene ii, and tells her that her son *has been* captured and *is now being* scourged:

Maria, ch'el tuo figluolo è preso, E Giuda gle fe' 'l trademento. Da capo a piei è tucto aliso, Tanto gl'òn dato tormento; E nudo nudo el fe' spoglare Pilato, e fa 'l forte frustare.

(Mary, your son has been taken;/ Judas betrayed him./ From head to foot he is all torn,/so badly have they tormented him./ Pilate had him stripped all naked,/ and is having him cruelly scourged.) (vv. 307-12)

Mary and the Sisters move toward Pilate's court, meeting John

along the way, lamenting together. Mary draws near the court and sees her son:

Chi me t'à tolto, o figluol mio, Ch'iersera a casa non tornaste? De te tradir co' s'ardio Quil con cuie pur ier cenaste? Giuda, el tuo apetito avaro A la dolente costa caro.

(Who has taken you away from me, O my son,/ so that you did not come home last night?/ How did that man dare betray you,/ who only yesterday had supper with you?/ Judas, your hunger for money/ costs the Sorrowful One dearly.) (vv. 349-54)

Christ seems to hear his mother's voice before he is able to see her, probably because of the unruly crowd clustered around him:

Or, nonn è la mate mia, Quilla che me pare udire? Priegove per cortesia Che la lassiate a me venire. Più me duol del suo lamento Che de tucto el mio tormento.

(Is it not my mother/ that I seem to hear now?/ I beg you, please,/ let her come to me./ Her lament grieves me/ more than all my torment.) (vv. 355-60)

Mary pushes her way through the crowd with painful difficulty, for the "hungry people" throw themselves on her, knock her about. When she is finally near enough to see him, Christ laments to her about the scourging and other torments he has already endured:

Co' tu me vede, madre, stare, Così gram parte de la nocte Nonn òn posato me frustare, Chi de puine, chi d'altre bocte, Chi me sputa per lo viso, Chi me fiere el capo arciso.

(As you see me now, mother,/ so for a great part of the night/ they have not stopped scourging me;/ some punched me, some dealt me other blows./ Some spit in my face,/ others strike my bleeding wounded head.) (vv. 367-72)

A satisfying way to explain this use of the past tense in reference to the scourging is to say that it has been taking place in mime simultaneously with the three brief scenes just des-

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cribed, and that it ceases shortly before Mary nears Pilate's court. The playwright again takes liberties with the gospel text: he has the scourging sequence indicate the transition from Thursday night to Friday morning, fusing the torment ordered by Pilate with the nocturnal mocking of Christ in the house of Caiaphas recorded by Luke (22.63-65). The rest of the play consists, for the most part, of the lamenting of Mary, Magdalen, the Sisters, and John over the sufferings they see Christ experiencing until he sets out for Calvary bearing a great cross, and the play ends.

What we have then, in the scourging sequence, is a carefully choreographed transition between the two parts of the play that are distinguishable mainly by differences in mode. This transition employs mime, repetition and variation, final exits and first entrances of main characters, movement away from and back to a central sedes where all the while Christ is being scourged. Now, where the first part of the play, before Christ is bound to the column, presents a relatively straightforward dramatization of the gospel narrative with events compressed or rearranged to meet artistic needs, the introduction of "someone telling Mary about the passion of her son" marks the beginning of the second division, with the narration in dialogue of events already enacted or presently taking place somewhere else. Against the background of the mimed scourging, such narration serves to introduce Mary, the Sisters, and John, and to add the dimension of their anguished compassion to these events. Verses 307-30 seem to fold back over the strict scriptural dramatization of the preceding scenes, reiterating them, but this time in the lyric mode. Then, at verse 335 as Mary leaves the cenacle and begins to approach Pilate's court, dramatic action moves forward again, now wholly suffused with elements of lyric lament. This second mode is maintained until the end of the play.

The stanza beginning with verse 307, where the lyric mode is introduced, bears close examination. Mary is told that her son has been arrested; Judas betrayed him. So badly have the soldiers tormented him that he is all torn from head to foot. Pilate has had him stripped naked and is having him cruelly scourged. Although a scene similar to this is described in *Meditations* LXXV, where Christ stands bound to a column, not for the scourging, but to be kept during the night, left to the insults and assaults of the guards, a more immediate source can surely be found in the opening verses of Jacopone da Todi's only fully dialogued *lauda*, his "Donna de Paradiso,"<sup>13</sup> a composition often considered a very early example, if not the ancestor, of the dramatic Umbrian *lauda*:

Donna de Paradiso, lo tuo figliolo è preso, Iesù Cristo beato. Accurre, donna, e vide che la gente l'allide: credo che lo s'occide, tanto l'ho flagellato.

(Lady of Paradise,/ your son has been taken,/ blessed Jesus Christ./ Run, lady, and see/ that the people tear him;/ I think they will kill him,/ they have scourged him so.) (vv. 1-7)

As Singnore scribe proceeds, other echoes of Jacopone and the vernacular tradition he represents, that of the lyric lamentation, are clearly heard. We are far from the spare biblical dramatization of the play's first part, with its three Latin insertions.

Assistance in understanding both the bipartite structure and modal variety of Singnore scribe may be found by examining a parallel work contained in an Assisian laudario coeval with and closely related to the Perugian collection. The laudario attributed to the Confraternity of St. Peter in Assisi contains sixteen compositions,14 among them three laments of the Virgin15 and a shorter version of Singnore scribe. This shorter version closely parallels the first part of the hybrid Perugian play, but ends with the scene of Judas' despair, just before the lyric element would be introduced-that is, just before "someone" tells Mary about the passion of her son. This abrupt ending of the Assisian play can be considered purposeful, since it affords a proper occasion for the intonation of one of the many dramatic laments of the Virgin known to Umbrian tradition, three of which are contained in the same manuscript, or, perhaps even Jacopone's "Donna de Paradiso" which picks up the action just where the Assisian passion play leaves off and carries it through to Christ's death. It is interesting to consider just how aptly "Donna" would serve this purpose, for the dialogue of its introductory stanzas narrates the capture and scourging as having already happened, as indeed they have in the Assisian play; yet, as Mary nears Pilate's court, the tense shifts to the present and

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the rest of Jacopone's *lauda* either narrates or presents in dialogue the on-going experiences of Christ, Mary, and John. If such a dramatic lament were added on to a brief passion play, stanza form and melody would have to change, but a somewhat similar "polyphonic" treatment exists in the Perugian Harrowing of Hell play where, just as Christ leads Adam out of Limbo, stanza form and melody change with a flourish from passional to paschal.<sup>16</sup> It seems possible, then, that the Assisian author composed his play in an abbreviated form with the intention of completing the presentation of the passion with the addition of a well-known dialogued lament. Such a combination of forms may also represent an earlier version of the related Perugian play, so intimately were the two traditions allied.

Devotion to the passion of Christ was central to the religious concerns of the fourteenth century disciplinati, so it is no wonder that the longest play in the prestigious St. Andrew collection should portray the initial scenes of that passion with a highly developed artistry and a theatrical skill not attained by many of the other works accompanying it. Nowhere are these qualities more evident than in the transitional sequence wherein the anonymous author begins to fuse elements of the traditional lyric lament with the on-going scriptural dramatization of the second part of his play, a transitional sequence that employs one of the earliest notable examples of simultaneous staging in Italian vernacular drama. And, it is interesting to consider that this sequence is presented against the background of a mimed presentation of just that aspect of the passion that the confraternities sought to imitate in their characteristic penitential ritual: the scourging of Christ.

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#### NOTES

<sup>2</sup> See Anna Maria Vinti, "Precisazioni sul movimento dei flagellanti e sui maggiori laudari perugini," *Studi di Filologia Italiana*, 8 (1950), 316-19.

<sup>3</sup> See Ignazio Baldelli, "La lauda e i disciplinati," reprinted in his Medioevo volgare da Montecassino all'Umbria (Bari: Adriatica Editrice, 1971), p. 348.

<sup>1</sup> See Pier Lorenzo Meloni, "Topografia, diffusione, e aspetti delle confraternite dei disciplinati," in *Risultati e prospettive della ricerca sul movimento dei disciplinati,* Convegno Internazionale di Studio, Perugia, 5-7 decembre 1969 (Perugia: Deputazione di Storia Patria per l'Umbria: Centro di Documentazione sul Movimento dei Disciplinati, 1972), pp. 15-98.

4 All quotations from *Singnore scribe* are from my "Scriptural Plays from Perugia," Diss. State University of New York at Stony Brook (1974), pp. 50-103.

5 "La lauda," p. 345.

6 Ibid., p. 343.

7 Scriptural references in my text are to *Biblia Vulgata*, 4th ed., ed. Alberto Colunga and Laurentio Turrado (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> References in my text are to the *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century; Paris, Bibl. Nat. MS. Ital. 115, trans.* Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961).

9 "La lauda," pp. 345-46. This passage may be translated as follows: "The lauda Segnore scribe serves, too, to make clear the relationship of the dramatic lauda of the flagellants with the medieval liturgical theater, for we find . . . inserted into its proper place according to the gospel account the passage: Quem queritis? Ihesum Nazarenum. Ego sum. The famous trope, as is well known, was taken from this place in the scripture and applied to the Visitatio sepulcri; nevertheless, the insertion of this passage, albeit into its proper scriptural place, could have been suggested by the remembrance of the Quem queritis of the sepulche trope."

<sup>10</sup> Quotations from the Montecassino Passion are from the edition of D. M. Inguanez, "Un dramma della Passione del secolo XII," Miscellanea Cassinese, 17 (1939), 7-55; reprinted by Sandro Sticca in The Latin Passion Play: Its Origins and Development (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1970), pp. 66-78, to which I refer.

11 These valuable inventories, destroyed in an anti-fascist uprising at the end of World War II, were partially edited by Ernesto Monaci in his "Appunti per la storia del teatro italiano: Uffizj drammatici dei disciplinati dell'Umbria," *Rivista di Filologia Romanza*, 1 (1872), 257-60.

12 See Anna Maria Jemma, "Le confraternite disciplinate di S. Fiorenzo e di S. Simone in Perugia," Diss. Università degli Studi, Perugia 1969, pp. 62-69.

13 Gianfranco Contini, ed., Poeti del duecento (Milano: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1960), II, 119.

14 MS. Vittorio Emanuele 478 (già Frondini), Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele, Roma.

15 "Or ve piaccia d'ascoltare," "Venete a piangere con Maria," and "O Die, gente, or que remore," on ff. 11, 18v, and 23.

16 See the Holy Saturday play Quiste lume in my "Scriptural Plays," pp. 184-86.