

The background of the cover is a rich, deep red fabric with a subtle sheen, showing soft folds and highlights that create a sense of depth and texture. The fabric is draped across the entire surface, with the folds curving and flowing in a diagonal direction from the top left towards the bottom right.

*York Mystery Plays*

A Selection in Modern Spelling

**OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS**

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# ***York Mystery Plays A Selection in Modern Spelling***

*Edited by*

RICHARD BEADLE

*and*

PAMELA M. KING

**OXFORD**  
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## YORK MYSTERY PLAYS

THE YORK MYSTERY PLAYS are the oldest and best-preserved of the four great cycles of biblical drama that have survived from late-medieval England. Composed by a number of dramatists, and frequently revised throughout their long career, they came into being in the late fourteenth century, and for the next two hundred years were normally performed annually on the feast of Corpus Christi, until they were suppressed by the agencies of militant Protestantism. The cycle consists of some fifty short plays written in robust northern dialect verse, about half of which are presented here in modern spelling. Each play was part of a chronological sequence drawn from the Old and New Testaments and the apocryphal accretions, and all were subtly related to one another and to the great epic theme of the cycle as a whole, the Fall and Redemption of humanity. Each of these individual plays was financed and brought forth by one of the craft-guilds (or 'mysteries') of the city in a vast procession production lasting from dawn until after midnight. Modern revivals by the National Theatre, by university drama departments, and by the people of York itself, continue to reveal their remarkable theatrical power to move, amuse and instruct.

RICHARD BEADLE is a University Lecturer in English and a Fellow of St John's College, University of Cambridge. He edited the complete old-spelling text of the cycle upon which this selection is based, *The York Plays* (London, 1982), and is the general editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* (Cambridge, 1994).

PAMELA M. KING is head of the Department of English at St Martin's University College, Lancaster, and is the author of a number of articles on medieval English and Scottish literature, especially the drama.





# PREFACE

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THIS volume contains twenty-two of the forty-seven extant pageants which go to make up the York Cycle of Mystery Plays. They have been selected on the grounds of their literary and dramatic merit and also with a view to giving some idea of the scope and nature of the oldest and best-preserved of the English Corpus Christi cycles. The selection is designed with both the general reader and the student of medieval literature and early drama in mind, and it is also hoped that, although we have deliberately not attempted to include the apparatus of a performance script, the imaginative director will find here texts that will repay production in a variety of modern theatrical settings.

As well as illustrating something of the range of style and dramatic technique at the disposal of the medieval playwright, the selection is also intended to emphasize how the shape of the cycle was governed by subject-matter of profound and enduring spiritual significance, both to its contemporary audience and in later literary and artistic tradition. We have therefore included the plays on the Creation, the Fall of Man, the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ, and the Last Judgement. Within this abridgement of the cycle we have also included three further Old Testament plays, but we have expanded the selection principally by including plays associated with either the Nativity or the Crucifixion, thus creating two smaller cycles within the greater framework. The Passion sequence includes six of the eight plays often attributed to the York Realist, the first great poetic dramatist to have written in English, and this is the first time that the bulk of his work has been made available in an authentic text outside scholarly editions of the cycle.

The modernized texts presented here are derived from the critical edition of the original manuscript in *The York Plays* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), York Medieval Texts, second series, edited by Richard Beadle. The publishers and editors are grateful to Messrs Arnold for permission to use this text as the basis of the present selection. Each play is preceded by a brief Headnote drawing attention to such matters as sources, dramaturgy, versification, and staging, and also indicating some critical and interpretative approaches. The texts are accompanied by running glossaries and long explanations of difficult lines and phrases at the foot of the page. The General Introduction deals with the origins and history of the cycle, including the circumstances of the early performances, drawing on documentary records in the civic archives at York. Attention is also paid to a number of modern productions. References to books and articles cited by the names of their authors will be found identified in the Select Bibliography, which is also intended to serve as a guide to further reading.

We would like to thank Mr R. Costley, who drew the map in the introduction. The edition is affectionately dedicated to Professor Derek Pearsall, co-Director of the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, by two grateful former students.

R. B.

P. M.

## PREFACE TO THE WORLD'S CLASSICS EDITION

SINCE the publication of the Clarendon Press edition of these plays in 1984, the York cycle has continued to hold a central place in the study and performance of medieval English drama. As well as the now traditional production every third year or so as part of the York Festival, a number of the

plays achieved their finest modern professional realization in the context of the National Theatre promenade production *The Mysteries* (1977–85), subsequently filmed for Channel Four Television and available on videotape. Equally important revivals of a different kind also took place in York in 1988 and 1992, where, under the auspices of a number of university English and drama departments, parts of the cycle were played—for the first time since the suppression of the plays in the late sixteenth century—on reconstructions of the pageant wagons, moved from station to station along sections of the original processional route through the city. These and other aspects of the plays have recently been reviewed in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, edited by Richard Beadle (Cambridge, 1994), which includes a chapter and an up-to-date bibliographical section devoted to York and its early drama. Aspects of the social, economic and ideological background are studied in *Contexts for Early English Drama*, edited by Marianne G. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989), and a variety of recent critical approaches are brought together in *Medieval English Drama: A Casebook*, edited by Peter Happé (London, 1984).

R. B.

P. M. I.



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# ABBREVIATIONS

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*Econ. H.R. Economic History Review*

EETS Early English Text Society

OS Original Series

ES Extra Series

SS Supplementary Series

*JEGP Journal of English and Germanic Philology*

*LSE Leeds Studies in English*

*MP Modern Philology*

*PMLA Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*

*REED Records of Early English Drama*

*SP Studies in Philology*

*UTQ University of Toronto Quarterly*

*VCH Victoria County History*

*YES Yearbook of English Studies*



# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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THE York Cycle of Mystery Plays is one of the great literary and theatrical monuments of the late Middle Ages in England, though to describe the cycle as solely a medieval phenomenon is in some ways misleading. Though it came into being in the later fourteenth century, when Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Langland's *Piers Plowman* were being composed, it enjoyed a general continuous run of annual performances until the late 1560s, and Shakespeare's lifetime. The cycle was an immense undertaking for the city, both financially and in terms of the manpower required to mount it: the text as it has come down to us calls for over 300 speaking parts alone. Its spiritual purpose was the glorification of God, and its didactic intention to instruct the unlettered in the historical basis of their faith, but there is no doubt that the cycle was also intended to reflect the wealth and prestige of the city, particularly the economic pride and self-confidence of the merchants and master-craftsmen who financed the performances annually. The cycle seems to have come into being with the great flowering of York's prosperity in the second half of the fourteenth century, after the Black Death of 1349, when the city stood second only to London in national importance and wealth. Its decline after the middle of the sixteenth century parallels the economic decline of York itself during that period, whilst the rapid rise and spread of the extremer forms of Protestantism began to render the plays doctrinally suspect relic of the old faith.

York's is the oldest and best preserved of the surviving English cycles. One similar in scope and nature has come down to us from Chester, and there are also comparable collections of plays in the 'Towneley' and 'N-Town' manuscripts. The Towneley manuscript contains plays connected with Wakefield, together with several pieces partially or wholly borrowed from York, which may well represent the Wakefield cycle. The 'N-Town' plays, judging by their dialect, originated in East Anglia, but are not known to have been connected with any particular town or with craft-guilds, as the northern cycles were. The antiquarian misnomer by which they were long known (*Ludus Coventriae*) is not now used, but fragments of the genuine Coventry cycle have survived, as have single plays from the lost cycles of Norwich and Newcastle. Many other towns and cities in the British Isles are known to have once had play-cycles, but now only fleeting documentary references to them remain, buried in old civic muniments. Such cycles in their own day were often known—at least in the north—by the generic title 'Corpus Christi plays'. Such was the case at York, where the surviving medieval muniments of the city tend to refer to the entire cycle in the singular: Corpus Christi play. It is a pity that this authentic expression has been replaced by the late antiquarian invention 'mystery plays'. 'Corpus Christi' preserves reference to the festival day on which the cycle was performed annually, and 'play' embodies the recognition that the cycle was intended to be seen as a coherent and unified work of art, a spiritual statement of a communal belief in God's relationship to man. The cycles of York and elsewhere were evidently the work of several dramatists from the start, and they were undoubtedly revised by others over the years but, as we shall see, the artistic and spiritual object of the whole and the subtle interrelatedness of the parts remain. An appropriate comparison to the cycles in this respect might be the Gothic cathedrals of northern Europe, such as York Minster, built and decorated in a succession of styles by generations of craftsmen but unified by a single spiritual aim.

Corpus Christi day was a movable feast, the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday, which might fall on any date between 23 May and 24 June. It became widely observed in England in the second decade of the fourteenth century, and was proclaimed in York in 1325. Theologically speaking, the feast of Corpus Christi celebrated the Real Presence of the Body of Christ in the Host at Mass. Arguments



have been put forward in an attempt to link the content and structure of the cycles with the spiritual significance of the feast, but none is particularly convincing. The link between the feast and the cycle may equally have been a practical matter. When Corpus Christi was instituted it became in effect the Church's midsummer festival, coinciding with the obvious and traditional period for outdoor celebrations and observances of any kind, whether religious or secular or, of course, pre-Christian. It is interesting to note that one of the official requirements of Corpus Christi was an outdoor procession in which the laity and clergy followed a vessel carrying the Sacred Host around the streets of the town. As is explained in detail below, the York cycle was presented in the form of a procession, and the pageant-wagons on which the individual plays were performed at first followed the liturgical procession along a traditional ceremonial route through the city. No documentary evidence, however, has survived to show precisely why it was decided to stage the cycle processionally, or how the performance came to be attached to Corpus Christi. Perhaps the attraction of a great summer festival which included an outdoor symbolic procession, was sufficient to stimulate the imagination of dramatists who had already brooded upon an established cycle of interrelated biblical and apocryphal subjects, common in medieval art and narrative long before the Corpus Christi cycles came into being.

The York cycle and its congeners were dramas of the Fall and Redemption of man, cast as historical narrative, drawing on the Bible and its apocryphal accretions for the subject-matter. The medieval audiences of the plays felt themselves to be deeply implicated in this presentation of sacred history. The essential episodes were the Creation of the world and of man, man's deception by the Devil, resulting in the Fall and the expulsion from Paradise, and his Redemption through the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ. In addition, all the extant cycles proceeded beyond Christ's work of Redemption on earth and also treated an event of the future: Christ's second coming at the Last Judgement. One of the principal effects of the cycle as a whole in performance was to place the audience in a position of God-like omniscience as regards the continuing history and nature of their spiritual predicament on earth. Out of this arose a need for them to examine their consciences and to decide where their allegiance lay in the conflict between good and evil for possession of the souls of the human race—the need for such a decision being finally borne in upon them personally and urgently by the stark choice presented in the Last Judgement play. All the other biblical and legendary events dramatized in the cycles were in one way or another expansions or elaborations of the moments of central importance in the spiritual history of mankind. For example, the Creation and Fall were extended by dramatizing a series of Old Testament events sufficient to show the predicament of fallen man and his need for redemption, and to prefigure the coming of the Redeemer and his earthly existence. One of the chief organizing principles underlying the construction of the cycles was typology, whereby the persons and incidents of the Old Testament plays were held to foreshadow things to come later in the sequence. For instance, Noah and Moses were included as 'types' of Christ with the Flood adumbrating the Last Judgement and the salvation of the righteous, whilst the Exodus looked forward to the Harrowing of Hell. This principle was also extended to the wicked characters of the drama, such as Pharaoh and the two Herods, whose words and actions were made to reflect those of the Devil in his various appearances in the story. The contemporary vogue for Gospel harmonies and contemplative treatments of the life of Christ led the playwrights to emphasize the events surrounding the Nativity and the Passion, at the expense of his ministry on earth. At York, the dramatization of the Passion came to occupy about half the cycle, and was much revised over the years.

At the earliest stage in the history of the York cycle a decision must have been taken to divide the long sequence of events stretching from the Creation to the Last Judgement into manageable units for the purposes of processional performance. Each of these units became a separate play, or, as it was then often known, 'pageant', and each was assigned to a particular craft-guild of the city. The craft

guilds therefore became responsible for furnishing the pageant-wagon on which the play was to be performed, and for finding suitable actors, properties, costumes, and so forth. It is also possible that the guilds commissioned scripts for their plays locally, but the names of the playwrights have not survived. Those sufficiently learned in sacred history are likely to have been clerics, such as parish priests, guild chaplains, and chantry priests, or perhaps members of the monastic or mendicant orders who were strongly present in York. The result of this dividing-up of the long narrative was the following sequence of pageants, which for the most part reflects the cycle as it was constituted in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, about half-way through its two-hundred-year existence. The plays marked with an asterisk are those included in the present selection. Those with an obelisk against them are no longer extant, but are known through documentary references in the civic archives at York.

* The Barkers	<i>The Fall of the Angels</i>
The Plasterers	<i>The Creation</i>
The Cardmakers	<i>The Creation of Adam and Eve</i>
The Fullers	<i>Adam and Eve in Eden</i>
* The Coopers	<i>The Fall of Man</i>
The Armourers	<i>The Expulsion</i>
The Glovers	<i>Cain and Abel</i>
* The Shipwrights	<i>The Building of the Ark</i>
* The Fishers and Mariners	<i>The Flood</i>
The Parchmentmakers and Bookbinders	<i>Abraham and Isaac</i>
* The Hosiers	<i>Moses and Pharaoh</i>
The Spicers	<i>The Annunciation and Visitation</i>
* The Pewterers and Founders	<i>Joseph's Trouble about Mary</i>
* The Tilehatchers	<i>The Nativity</i>
The Chandlers	<i>The Shepherds</i>
* The Masons; The Goldsmiths	<i>Herod and The Magi</i>
St Leonard's Hospital	<i>The Purification</i>
* The Marshals	<i>The Flight into Egypt</i>
* The Girdlers and Nailers	<i>The Slaughter of the Innocents</i>
The Spurriers and Lorimers	<i>Christ and the Doctors</i>
The Barbers	<i>The Baptism</i>
* The Smiths	<i>The Temptation</i>
† The Vintners	<i>The Marriage at Cana</i>
The Curriers	<i>The Transfiguration</i>
† The Ironmongers	<i>Jesus in the House of Simon the Leper</i>
The Cappers	<i>The Woman taken in Adultery/The Raising of Lazarus</i>
* The Skinners	<i>The Entry into Jerusalem</i>
* The Cuders	<i>The Conspiracy</i>
The Bakers	<i>The Last Supper</i>
The Cordwainers	<i>The Agony in the Garden and the Betrayal</i>

* The Bowers and Fletchers	<i>Christ before Annas and Caiaphas</i>
* The Tapiters and Couchers	<i>Christ before Pilate (1): The Dream of Pilate's Wife</i>
* The Litsters	<i>Christ before Herod</i>
The Cooks and Waterleaders	<i>The Remorse of Judas</i>
* The Tilemakers	<i>Christ before Pilate (2): The Judgement</i>
The Shearmen	<i>The Road to Cabary</i>
* The Pinners	<i>The Crucifixion</i>
* The Butchers	<i>The Death of Christ</i>
* The Saddlers	<i>The Harrowing of Hell</i>
* The Carpenters	<i>The Resurrection</i>
The Winedrawers	<i>Christ's Appearance to Maty Magdalene</i>
The Woolpackers and Woolbrokers	<i>The Supper at Emmaus</i>
The Scriveners	<i>The Incredulity of Thomas</i>
The Tailors	<i>The Ascension</i>
The Potters	<i>Pentecost</i>
The Drapers	<i>The Death of the Virgin</i>
† The Linenweavers	<i>The Funeral of the Virgin</i>
The Woollenweavers	<i>The Assumption of the Virgin</i>
The Hostlers	<i>The Coronation of the Virgin</i>
* The Mercers	<i>The Last Judgement</i>

The manuscript containing the text of the cycle is a large volume, measuring about 11 inches by 15 inches, consisting of 268 parchment leaves, bound in oak boards covered with leather. It is nearly all in the handwriting of a single unidentified scribe, who probably executed the work at some time between 1463 and 1477. Known as the 'Register' of the Corpus Christi play, this manuscript constituted the city's official record of the content of the cycle, and was the property of the corporation. In the sixteenth century there are records of the fact that it was used by a city official to check what the actors were actually saying in the course of the annual performance. Many pages have later annotations deriving from this activity, showing where plays had been revised, or had even been completely rewritten since the compilation of the manuscript. Contrary to a widely held belief, the sixteenth-century annotations in the manuscript were not the work of reforming ecclesiastical censors, though we do know from other sources that the plays near the end of the cycle on the later life of the Virgin Mary were suppressed in 1548. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Register passed through the hands of several antiquarians and collectors, before coming to its final resting place in the British Museum in 1899.

The Register was compiled from copies of the individual plays held by the craft-guilds for the purposes of rehearsal and performance. A sixteenth-century example of one of these prompt-copies, called 'Originals' as they were known, has survived (the Scriveners' *Incredulity of Thomas*) but the rest are lost. For something of the history of the cycle prior to the compilation of the Register one must turn to documentary materials in the civic archives at York. Among them is the volume known as the 'A/ Memorandum Book', which contains records of many of the most important decisions of the governing body of the city in the Middle Ages, the ordinances and constitutions of numerous craft-guilds, and an interesting document called the 'Ordo Paginarum', 'The Order of the Pageants'. This consists of a list of the guilds, similar to the one given above, with a note of the content of the

respective plays. It was compiled by the Town Clerk in 1415, and was probably used to check the ordering and content of the cycle in the period before the Register was compiled. The Order of the 'Pageinarum', though itself much altered and revised, reveals that the cycle had by 1415 assumed the shape and scope it was to have for the rest of its career. Comparison with the text in the Register reveals that a number of plays were revised during the fifteenth century, and that some were reassigned to other guilds. The Passion section, in particular, was extensively reworked by an outstandingly able dramatist, known as the York Realist (see the Headnote to the *Conspiracy*). However, the general aspect and scope of the cycle remained the same, as it was to do until its decline and eventual abandonment in the latter half of the sixteenth century.

The origins and progress of the cycle up to 1415 are much more difficult to trace because of the paucity of documentary evidence, but a reference in a document dated 1376, referring to the storage of three Corpus Christi pageant-wagons, is sometimes taken to imply that the entire cycle was already in existence at that date. A more certain construction may be placed on a petition, dated 1399, sent by the commons of the city to its governing body, pointing out that the Corpus Christi play was a great financial burden on the craft-guilds, and that it was tending to overrun its allotted day of performance. This petition also sets out for the first time the processional route through the city taken by the pageant-wagons, and the 'stations' where they stopped to perform before the audiences which had gathered.

The craft-guilds of medieval York were the principal units of social and economic organization in medieval English towns in general, being made up of master-craftsmen in the various trades and callings, who had gained the franchise of the city either through satisfactory apprenticeship or inheritance. As well as establishing standards of workmanship, administering the system of apprenticeship, and laying down the lines of demarcation between trades, the guilds also had important social characteristics and functions. The members of a guild, their families, and apprentices lived their lives partially in common, often occupying the same area of the city, as some of the surviving street-names of York show (Spurriergate, Tanner Row). They tended to worship together at the same church, and dined together on the feast of their patron saint or other liturgical occasion. Many had their own halls; those of the Merchant Adventurers and Merchant Tailors are still to be seen in York. The craft-guilds were occasionally referred to as 'mysteries', and from the association of the crafts with the pageants of the Corpus Christi play arose the modern expression 'mystery plays'. 'Mystery' should not, therefore, be understood to connote anything as to the content of the cycle. The expenses of the annual performance of each play in the cycle were defrayed by a levy on the guild to which that play was assigned. Little is known as to precisely how the guilds came to have responsibility for their particular plays, owing to lack of evidence from the earliest period of the cycle's history. The appropriateness of some of the assignments to the occupations of the guilds is obvious: the Shipwrights' *Building of the Ark*, the Vintners' *Marriage at Cana* (where Christ turned the water into wine), the Bakers' *Last Supper*. These 'appropriate' assignments probably had much to do with the idea of the sanctity of a craft's daily labour, its part in the divine eternal scheme of things, and the history of man's salvation, rather than the crude modern notion that the guilds used the play to 'advertise' their products.

The performance of the cycle as a whole was organized and regulated by the governing body of the city, which was elected by and from the members of the craft-guilds. It appears that the ecclesiastical authorities had no part in it at this official level, though the parish clergy and members of religious orders were undoubtedly involved in helping to bring forth individual pageants, sometimes as 'directors'. The events leading up to the annual performance were set in motion early in Lent, when the civic authorities met and sent out formal instruction to each participating guild to bring forth its play on Corpus Christi day, three months or so hence. The guilds then held meetings

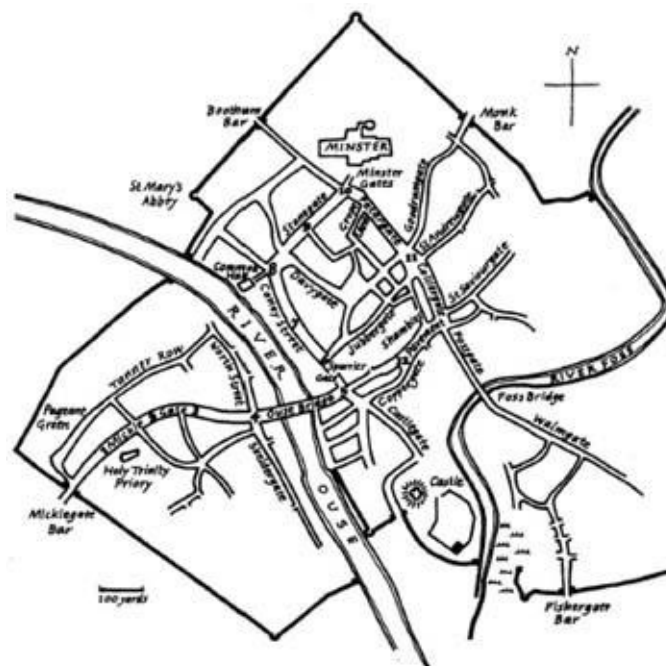
make detailed arrangements for their own productions. These were at first principally financial. Each guild elected officers known as 'pageant-masters', in effect the producers of the play, whose first task it was to collect the money paid by the craftsmen towards their play, their 'pageant silver'. As well as collecting annually from their members, the guilds also operated a system of fines for poor workmanship and various technical infringements of guild regulations, the proceeds of which also went towards the play. The pageant-masters laid out their money in a variety of ways. The storage and maintenance of the pageant-wagon and the purchase or refurbishment of properties and costumes were the main material expenses. In addition, a 'director' (though no such word then existed) and suitable actors had to be found, and their refreshments provided at rehearsal and on the day of performance. Evidence surviving in the records of the Mercers' and Bakers' guilds suggests that money was given to an individual, sometimes a cleric, who had responsibility for directing their play. It was evidently his task to hire, rehearse, and pay the actors, which suggests a degree of 'professionalism' in the presentation of the cycle. Finally, the pageant-masters gave a dinner shortly after Corpus Christi, at which the officers of the guild reviewed their financial position.

Before entering into greater detail about arrangements for the day of performance, it is necessary to enlarge upon what has already been said about the processional presentation of the plays. Each of the plays which make up the cycle was staged on a wagon. The wagons are thought to have proceeded in the appropriate order around the city, taking a traditionally established route, and halting at a series of 'stations' at which audiences had assembled, a performance of each play being given at each station. The number of stations along the route was usually twelve, and (though scholars differ about this) it appears that each pageant could have been given twelve times in the course of Corpus Christi day. The performance is known to have begun at 4.30 a.m., when the first pageant proceeded to the first station, and modern calculations suggest that it would not have been until after midnight when the last play ended at the twelfth station. It is not known how York arrived at this remarkable mode of presentation for its cycle, but in an age with little or no concept of a purpose-built theatre, the processional production was an ingenious solution to the problem of how to show a large urban audience a cycle of plays running to over 14,000 lines.

Corpus Christi day was of course a public holiday and a day of popular festivity as well as a liturgical feast. Final arrangements for the presentation of the plays included the assignment of stations at which performances were to be given. At these stations along the processional route banners bearing the city's coat of arms were set up and a scaffold for the accommodation of the audience was built. Stations were let by the city to the highest bidder, who was then presumably in a position to charge the audience for seating and refreshments during the long performance. Many of the audience, however, must have stood in the street to see the plays, and have wandered from station to station in the course of the day.

The route along which the stations were distributed never varied, though the positions of some of the stations could change slightly from year to year. Those familiar with the topography of York will see from the accompanying map that the streets along which the pageant-wagons passed remain to this day. The pageant-masters, actors, and others concerned with mounting the performance marshalled the pageant-wagons initially on an open space in the south-west angle of the city wall known as Pageant Green (or Toft Green). From there they moved into and along Micklegate, over Ouse Bridge, and then via Coney Street and Stonegate, past the Minster Gates, then through Low Petergate and Colliergate to the Pavement. It appears that the stations were on the right-hand side of this route, with the audience facing them on the left. The positions of some of the stations never varied. No. 1 was at the gates of the Priory of the Holy Trinity not far from Micklegate Bar. It was here that a civic official sat with the manuscript Register and checked the first performance of each play annually. The eighth station was close to the Guildhall, and here members of the city's governing body saw the plays free. No. 10,

Minster Gates, was favoured by the cathedral clergy, and the last station, on the Pavement, brought the plays to the commercial centre of the city, the site of markets, fairs, proclamations, and execution. Given the great length of the cycle and the number of times each play was performed, the swift and unhindered passage of the pageant-wagons from station to station was of the utmost importance. The civic authorities had the power to fine any guild whose play hindered the presentation of an order in sequence. At the end of the Wool-packers' and Woolbrokers' play of the *Supper at Emmaus* one of the characters actually says to the audience that they must now hasten to the next station:



Here may we not mell more at mis tide,  
 For process of plays that presses in plight.

(‘That is all we can say at this time, because of the procession of pageants which is queuing up [behind us]’).

To have established broadly how the cycle was designed for presentation is not to visualize what it would have looked like. It is clear, both from guild records and from internal evidence in the plays, that a pageant-wagon was neither simply a stage on wheels, nor a commercial vehicle, like the modern pageant ‘float’, converted for the day. The wagons used in the production of the York cycle were custom-built for each guild, to suit its play, and, what is more, were manhandled around the route, not drawn by animals. At that point, however, it becomes more difficult to be specific. York is not short of material in its civic records relating to pageant-wagons, but since everyone evidently knew what such vehicles looked like, they are never described from first principles. What comes down to the modern investigator, by and large, is a collection of cryptic accounts using unfamiliar or ambiguous terminology.

There are some references to the Bakers’ pageant-wagon in the records, which supply clues to its construction, but the picture would still be highly speculative, were it not for the survival of some important materials relating to the Mercers’ *Last Judgement* wagon over a period of years. The first of these is an indenture of 1433 which provides the nearest thing to a description of a wagon we are likely to find. It includes an inventory of parts for what the Mercers later call their ‘great pageant’. It is a ‘pageant with four wheels’, but clearly not a flat cart, for it has a complicated superstructure including a ‘heaven of iron’. It also appears to have incorporated integral winching gear by means of which God descended from, and ascended to, the said heaven. When the ‘hell-mouth’, also described as part of the structure, is added, a picture of a complicated multi-level structure begins to emerge.

This is in keeping with a later account from Norwich in which the Grocers' pageant-wagon is defined as, 'a house of wainscot ... on a cart with four wheels'.

Apart from the mechanical details concerning the transportation of God from one level to another, other items in the Mercers' indenture also give an indication of how the pageant-wagon was decorated. The mention of a backcloth, or 'coster', of red damask instantly demonstrates that the performance area had a back and a front, ruling out the possibility that the audience was grouped around the vehicle on all sides. Other cloths are also listed which would have concealed the wheels and the unsightly underside of the vehicle once it was *in situ* at a station. God had his own special backdrop, also a 'brandreth of iron', possibly like a modern fire-basket, with four ropes at the corners in which he came and went from heaven. Heaven itself was arrayed with red and blue clouds, golden stars, sunbeams, and a wooden rainbow. In addition there was a series of model angels, nine of which were operated mechanically by a 'long small cord', which caused them to 'run about in the heaven', the final stage direction in the play indicates.

Even with all the above information available in what is indeed an exceptional case, there has still been room for interpretation to have produced at least three careful and scholarly reconstructions which diverge in certain major respects. Crucially, none of the dimensions of the various parts mentioned. It is also clear from further documents associated with the guild that the Mercers, in times of particular affluence, were given to improving their equipage. In 1463 the guild added what appears to have been a completely separate entity, a 'new pageant that was made for the souls to rise out of'. About this 'pageant' there is much less information; it is not even clear that it had wheels, although this is probable, as the guild had had some small wheels made in the recent past. What is more, in 1501, the Mercers scrapped the 'great pageant' of the 1433 indenture and commissioned one built 'new substantially in everything thereunto belonging'. It is not until 1526 that there is anything approaching a description of the new vehicle, and then an inventory simply lists hell-door, window angels, an iron seat, several pulleys, and a cloud. Reconstruction on the basis of this meagre information is not really practicable.

What then is to be learned from the history of the Mercers' pageant-wagon over a period of nearly a hundred years? Perhaps most significantly it brings home the fact that a pageant-wagon was a very specific construction, intended solely for the production of a single episode in the cycle. In this sense, therefore, the Mercers' indenture tells us only about the manner in which the *Last Judgement* was staged. It may serve as a rough guide to what the other guilds' wagons were like, but it is important here to remember that the Mercers were an extremely wealthy guild throughout the period in question; wagons belonging to less affluent bodies may not have been so elaborate. Also there are plays in the cycle to which an enclosed playing space would not have been appropriate, for example *The Crucifixion*, which could well have been performed on a flat cart.

The Mercers' records contribute to a growing sense of the cycle as an essentially fluid event. In the same way that plays changed hands and were reworked, so too the visual aspect of the cycle must have changed over the years. As a guild's fortune increased it might have its play elaborated and rewritten, or have its pageant-wagon modified or replaced. One decision could lead to another, but the evidence for each change taking place survives, if it survives at all, in a variety of different sources. Similarly, declining fortunes would perhaps lead to guilds being unable to maintain their wagons and their plays at all, which in turn might lead to amalgamations with other small guilds, or transfer of the play to different ownership.

The pageant-wagon itself was an item of considerable value and prestige. From the point of view of the quality of workmanship involved, the records of the Mercers' 1501 wagon, about which there is less detail, impart one important piece of information: for the construction of the wagon the Mercers engaged a famous carver, Thomas Drawswerd. Fortunately an example of Drawswerd's work survives

in the beautiful rood screen in the church of St Mary Magdalen, Newark, Nottinghamshire. A cursory examination of the quality of carving involved serves to dispel any residual connection between the pageant-wagon and the farm cart, although the chassis and wheels were, in all probability, derived from the latter. It has indeed been suggested that the superstructure of the wagon was demountable for storage purposes, since storage of a multi-level vehicle, perhaps as much as 20 feet (6 metres) high would pose considerable problems. Many guilds had their own 'pageant-houses' or garages for the wagons. Many of these were close to Pageant Green (from where the cycle set out), often on land rented on an annual basis from the city authority. There is some evidence also of guilds sub-letting pageant-houses to one another.

Although it is possible to tell from the records that the pageant-houses were large and stoutly constructed buildings, the actual dimensions of the York pageant-wagon cannot be ascertained with any degree of accuracy. The length and breadth must, however, have been limited, if a vehicle made of heavy materials was to be manhandled around the narrower corners in the city. Even allowing for a generous estimate of surface area, the playing space afforded was very limited, making it difficult to visualize the staging of multi-location plays, such as the Hosiers' *Moses and Pharaoh*. The Mercer records make it clear that auxiliary 'pageants' might be used, and the Masons' and Goldsmiths' composite play shows two wagons being used in tandem, but in the absence of further evidence they must be treated as exceptions. No true picture of the staging of a play can be reached without due consideration of the evidence in the plays themselves for the use of the whole space available, not only on the pageant-wagon but also in the street around. It is in this respect that wagon performance diverges markedly from performance on the proscenium stage.

The York cycle's stage directions are few and far between, particularly when it comes to indicating movement from place to place, or the relative locations of different 'scenes' within the play. It is apparent in most of the longer plays that all of the action could not possibly have been accommodated on the deck of the wagon itself. In one of the surviving plays from the Coventry cycle there is the direction, 'Here Herod rages in the pageant and in the street also'. This has been eagerly seized upon as evidence that the arrangement suggested by the texts of many cycle plays was indeed correct. In twelfth- and thirteenth-century liturgical drama the action was divided between that which took place processionally, moving through the church, and that which was located in a symbolic area such as around the Easter Sepulchre, an altar designed for the ritual representation of the Resurrection. It is possible to see the individual play within the cycle in the same way, except that the area on the pageant-wagon serves for all the specific playing spaces (*loci*) and the street as the area in which unlocalized action took place (*platea*). Hence, in *The Conspiracy*, the *locus* is Pilate's court, the wagon being decorated to represent that, which means that the dialogue between Judas and the Porter would be conducted outside the court, in the street. Similarly in *Joseph's Trouble*, the wagon evidently Mary's house, and all of Joseph's long complaint, in which he solicits the sympathy of members in the audience, would have been delivered at their level. Obviously, there are still unexplained problems of staging when a play appears to involve more than one *locus*, but in broad terms the division of the action between street and wagon is the important one, particularly when the relationship between audience and players at a given moment is considered.

If the physical presentation of the York cycle can be reconstructed only in part, the manner in which it was acted is a matter of much greater speculation. As far as contemporary records are concerned, the necessary qualifications were cryptically described, but were apparently quite basic. After the 1415 'Ordo Paginarum' in the 'A/Y Memorandum Book' appears the Proclamation of the plays, which was made on the vigil of Corpus Christi, and also when the banners were set up in the designated positions for the stations, about a week before Corpus Christi. This specifies the manner in which the plays should be conducted, with an allusion to the players which simply requires that the



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