

A PROPOSAL OF PERFORMANCE FOR  
THE YORK MYSTERY CYCLE:  
EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL EVIDENCE

The York Mystery Cycle has been one of the most popular among scholars, since it has a clear connection with the city of York and its civic records. However, the way it was performed has been so largely discussed and disagreed upon by scholars, because the records seem to be ambiguous and obscure as they can hold various interpretations, since Corpus Christi celebrations in York had certainly been through different stages in their more than two hundred years of existence.

In a first stage, the festivity of Corpus Christi, from 1325 to the late 1370s, was probably only an outdoor religious procession in which the laity and clergy were accompanying a vessel with the Host. The celebration of the real presence of Christ in the Host at Mass was instituted in 1264 by Pope Urban IV and was widely observed from its ratification in 1311-12 by Clement V, when the Church adopted the Feast at Corpus Christi which was firstly observed in England in 1318 and proclaimed in York in 1325.

In a second stage the festivity of Corpus Christi, from at least the late 1370s, introduced dramatic elements and it is from this period of time that a cycle was built similar in scope and organization to the one documented in the Ordos from 1415 and 1420 and which was later recorded in the Register copied before 1477 (Beadle, 1982: 20-21). York had a great flowering after the Black Death of 1349 when it was second in importance and wealth to London (Bartlett, 1959: 25). This period seems the most suitable for an expansion of the mainly liturgical procession towards a more dramatic one.

The earliest documentary references to cycle drama in York date back to 1376 and 1397, as they are references to pageant houses where waggon were stored. The first evidence of the payment by craftsmen to their Corpus Christi

pageant is found in the *Tailors' Ordinances* of 1386-87 (White, 1987: 23 & REED, *York*: 3, 4-5, 689 and 680-91). In another record from 1399, the citizens petitioned the Council to ensure that the pageants of Corpus Christi Day were played 'en les lieux quelles furent limitez & assignez', that is to say in the places to which they were limited and assigned because they were being played in so many places that all the pageants could not be performed on the same day as they ought to be (White, 1987: 23). It was the duty of the Mayor and Council to assign the places each year for which leases were paid to hear the play. *The Chamberlains' Books* show how much was paid by each lessee for having the plays performed in front of their houses. It was during this prosperous period when attempts were probably made for every guild to take part and expand their participation, which could have been regarded not only as having a certain status in the community, but as being a way of commercialising and advertising their merchandise (Justice, 1979). Connection between guild and subject of the pageants was not entirely arbitrary, for example the Shipwrights were in charge of the play of Noah *The Building of the Ark*, the Fishers and Mariners of *The Flood*, the Vintners of *The Marriage at Cana* and the Bakers of the play *The Last Supper*. This probably caused a multiplication in the number of waggons and the writing of a text or expansion of the one existing.

According to a reading of the York civic records a processional performance of the York Cycle has been generally established, although a performance of all the plays at every station would have been impossible to carry out in a single day due to the length of time that would have been necessary to perform all of them. That suspicion was brought to light by M. Rose (1961: 25-26) and supported later by A. H. Nelson with a systematic time study in which he concluded that 'it would have been utterly impossible to mount a true processional production of the extant cycle in a single day' (1970: 310). M. Stevens in 'The York Cycle: From Procession to Play' (1972: 38) provided evidence for a single performance on the Pavement using a fixed stage. That would have been impossible too, for the records seem to show that there were performances on waggons at stations, and also because the text is structured in small plays. Although all these individual plays seem to have independence in themselves for being performed individually on waggons, they have unity between them for having been performed in a continuous way at a fixed place.

In order to reconstruct and demonstrate a possible new proposal of a performance of the York Mystery Cycle, it is necessary not only to study the external evidence supported by the records around the date of its writing, but also the internal evidence supported by the structured sequence of plays in the text. It is for these reasons that this study will concentrate on the performance of 1476, when there are several interesting records and the copy was probably already written, since it is agreed that the surviving text of the manuscript of the York cycle was copied by the main scribe between 1463 and 1477 (Beadle, 1982: 11). The external evidence for this new proposal of performance of the Cycle is based on some records about time, place and way of performance that need a closer reading or reinterpreting.

According to the records of time or duration of the performance, 'The Corpus Christi Plaie' was performed in one day 'vpon Corpus Christi day' in the year 1476 (REED, *York*, I, 110), and the starting time is established in the 1415 proclamation that says that all the players were to be ready at four thirty,

And that euery player that shall play be redy in his pagiaunt at conveyant tyme that is to say at the mydhowre betwix iii<sup>th</sup> & v<sup>th</sup> of the cloke in the mornyng & then all oyer pageantes fast folowyng ilkon after oyer as yer course is without Tarieng sub pena facienda camere vj s viij d. (REED, *York*, I, 25)

As for the records of place of performance, the number of stations to see the 'play' would have been twelve (fig. 1: see appendix), since there were twelve from 1398 to 1501, except for 1462 when there were only ten. After 1501 the number of stations varied from ten to sixteen (Mill, 1946-51; Twycross, 1978 & Crouch, 1991). The variations in the number of stations, mainly found during the sixteenth century, could be explained if some stations were not registered as they were not paying and if two entries for the money received were by two lessees from a single station.

The records state that the play was performed in all the stations. 'The play' according to A. C Cawley (1983: 31) always refers to the 'Corpus Christi Play', that is, the whole cycle of smaller plays or pageants, although one might not believe that that is very convincing in all instances and that some references to 'the play' would have stood for a single small play or for a selection of the plays performed at one station.

In addition, the records mention that the liturgical procession had a different route from the performance procession in their latter parts. That can only be understood as a way of clearing the way for the religious procession, when the performance procession was probably going through the last stations of its route or when the last waggons were queuing to make their entrance into the last station of the Pavement, where possibly all the plays were performed in a continuous way. In 1476 the liturgical procession was held on the following Friday probably after a lengthy performance procession, for the records say 'processione die veneris in Crastino festi Corporis christi' (REED, *York*, I, 109).

As for the records of way of performance, evidence that every single play was not performed at every station is confirmed by another record from 1476, which could possibly have been misinterpreted as relating to actors doubling their parts in the plays (Dorrell, 1972: 101, Stevens, 1972: 40 & Stevens, 1987, 27). A plausible interpretation would be that the plays were not to be performed more than twice:

And pat no plaier pat shall plaie in pe saide Corpus christi plaie be .  
conducte and Reteyned . to plaie . but twise on pe day of pe saide  
playe And pat he or thay so plaing plaie . not . ouere twise pe saide  
day vpon payne of xl s. to forfeit vnto pe Chaumbre asoften tymes as  
he or pay shall be founden defaultie in pe same. (REED, *York*, I, 109)

According to one reading of the record above, the plays should not have been played more than twice from that year on, so each play would have been performed only at two of the appointed stations from 1476, probably after a period of time in which they would have been performed in more than two, causing delays in the performance of the whole play and in the religious procession that followed.

Other records support this type of performance at only two places. An ordinance of the Armourers in 1475 regarding Masters attending their pageants says 'at pe firste place where they shall begyns and toawayte apon pe same thair pagende thurgh pe cite to pe play be plaide as of pat same pagende'. Similarly, in an ordinance of the Spurriers and Lorimers in 1493-94 'at pe furst place vnto such tyme as pe said play be plyed and funshed

through the town at pe last playse' (*REED, York, I*). Both records mention a first performance not obviously in front of the Holy Trinity Priory, as has been assumed. The need of specifying the place by using a postmodification would mean that there were different stations for every play 'pe firste place where they shall begyns' or 'pe furst place vnto such tyme as pe said play be played'. Then masters of the crafts were ordered 'toawayte apon pe same thair pagende thurgh pe cite', and that 'pe said play be [...] funshed through the town', so there were not complete performances through the city as the waggon was hastened through the town and the masters were waiting on the waggon for their last performance 'at pe last playse'.

Further evidence of a certain assignment of place for every play could be found in the ordinance for the Corpus Christi Play 1398-99 'que les pagentz suisditz soient jueez en les lieux quelles furent limitez et assignez par vous et les communes suisditz deuaunt ces heures les quelles lieux sont annexis a ceste bille'.

This new reading of the records for time, place and way of performance gives evidence for a different type of performance of the cycle from the ones proposed by scholars until now. This new proposal of performance of the York Cycle is based on the fact that every play would have been performed but that they were limited to two performances. One of the two performances at an assigned station, different for every play, that could have been at any of the first eleven stations along the route and the other at the last station of the Pavement.

The internal evidence within the text supports that type of performance and it is found in the distribution of the plays in the copy of the Register. The number of plays of the York Cycle is structured in five different groups of approximately the same number of plays, following a pattern of eleven, eight, eleven, eight and eleven plays. These five groups are: The Old Testament, The Early Life of Christ, The Ministry, The Passion and the final group of Triumphant and Eschatological plays (Woolf, 1972). This regular pattern could possibly indicate that the plays were written and structured to be performed in a certain way. This pattern of eleven and eight in the groups and the fact that there were eleven stations previous to the last one at the Pavement cannot be considered to be a coincidence. The smaller number of plays in the groups of eight could have been strategically devised for clearing the way in

the first tract of the route so the waggons could have returned to their storage once they had played their last performance at the Pavement.

Certainly, the way the whole processional performance was to be carried out created a need for an expansion of certain episodes to cover an equal division into groups of eleven and eight plays. Some episodes were split in two like the episode of Noah into *The Building of the Ark* and *The Flood*, and sometimes an episode was even divided into four little plays, for example the episode of Adam and Eve, or the episode of the Assumption. In the latter, the play of *Fergus* was probably part of the play of *The Death of the Virgin*, but it developed from it in order to fit the whole structure. Some other plays were joined together as *Herod* and *The Magi* to fit into the structure. On the other hand, some other plays were joined together with others, as a natural process, or were eliminated, probably for economic and social reasons. At this point some stations would have suffered a deficit in the number of plays performed there, which might explain the variation from station to station in the amount of money given to the Mayor as M. Twycross (1978: 2,10-33) and A.J. Mill (1948-51: 492-502) have shown.

Finally, at this point I would like to develop the proposal of a new possible way of performance for the York Mystery Cycle that would combine both processional and stationary performances within a reasonable time. According to the Proclamation, the procession of waggons would start at 4.30 in the morning. If the plays had had an assignment to a station for their first performance, the first one of *The Fall of the Angels* would have had to be performed at the eleventh station, the second play at the tenth station, and so on. In that way at every station only one of the plays of the Old Testament would have been performed. The second performance of every play from the Old Testament group could have been done continuously at the Pavement, which was the largest and the most suitable station for an audience and waggons. In that way the two performances of all the plays of the Old Testament would have taken at the most four hours, assuming average performances of twenty minutes each, since the production of three extant plays of the last part of the life of the Virgin Mary in the York Cycle on waggons in July 1988, took about that time for each play and *The Coronation of the Virgin* was acted in fifteen minutes, including the set up of the whole waggon. When all the plays of the Old Testament had been played once or after their second performance at the Pavement, providing in that way,

intervals of half an hour for the people attending the performance at the Pavement, the following group of eight plays of The Early Life of Christ would have arrived at their assigned station for their first performance, and their second performance would start at the Pavement half an hour after the last play of the Old Testament was performed. The two performances of this group of eight plays would have taken about three hours. Because the number of plays in this second group was shorter, the first part of the route was cleared out and the waggon from the Old Testament could return home, using the only access to cross the river and get back to their store houses. The same procedure would hold for the following groups of eleven plays from The Ministry, of eight plays from The Passion and of eleven plays from the Triumphal and Eschatological Plays.

Even in this way, the performance would have taken a great length of time, but it would have been reasonable, owing to the specific structure of the text that permitted its division into five groups and to the possibility that every play was completely performed at only two stations out of the twelve. This means that there were five simultaneous performances, in groups of eleven and eight plays at different stations. Every play was only acted twice, one of the performances at one of the first eleven stations along the route and the other at the last station of the Pavement. In this way anyone staying at any of the first eleven stations would have seen only five small plays actually completely performed; but these would have been representative of the whole cycle. The rest of the plays would have been mimed out in a processional performance as they were passing. But at the last station of the Pavement, the largest space for audience, the whole performance of all the plays would have been acted one after the other in a more or less continuous way and presented with a dramatic unity (Mackinnon, 1931: 438; Kolve, 1966; Woolf, 1972).

The total number of hours for such a performance would have been eighteen including four intervals of half an hour each for the performance at the Pavement. The acting out for every player taking part would have been completed in about two hours. Setting off at four thirty, the whole performance of all the plays would have been seen on the Pavement only half an hour after the performance procession had started and would have been completed around half past ten, or at the latest by midnight.

In conclusion, this new reading of the external evidence relating to how the York Mystery Cycle was produced is supported by the internal evidence of the arrangement of the plays themselves, in demonstrating that the text was written for a well structured performance that would have combined both processional and stationary performance. The processional performance of all the plays would have been along the route and the two stationary performances would have been held one at an assigned station different for every play and the other one at the last station of the Pavement.

Asunción Salvador-Rabaza Ramos  
Universitat de València

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bartlett, J. N. 1959: The Expansion and Decline of York in the Later Middle Ages. *The Economic History Review*, 2/12: 17-33.
- Beadle, R. 1982: *The York Plays*, London, Edward Arnold.
- Beadle, R. & P. Meredith eds 1983: *The York Play: A Facsimile of British Library MS Additional 35290 together with a Facsimile of the Ordo Paginarum Section of the A/Y Memorandum Book*. Introduction by R. Beadle & P. Meredith, Leeds Texts and Monographs, Medieval Drama Facsimiles, 7, Leeds, University of Leeds.
- Cawley, A. C. 1983: The Staging of Medieval Drama in POTTER, L. ed 1983: *Medieval Drama, The Revels History of Drama in English*. vol. I, London, Methuen.
- Crouch, D. 1991: Paying to See the Play. *Medieval English Theatre* 13: 64-111.
- Dorrell, M. 1972: Two Studies of the York Corpus Christi Play. *Leeds Studies in English* 6: 63-111.
- Johnston, A. F. 1974: The Procession and Play of Corpus Christi in York after 1426. *Leeds Studies in English* 7: 55-62.



*A proposal for the York Mystery Cycle*

---

- Johnston, A. F. & M. Rogerson 1979: *Records of Early English Drama*. 2 vols, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, references quoted as *REED, York*.
- Justice, A.D.1979: Trade Symbolism in the York Cycle. *Theatre Journal* 31: 47-58.
- Kolve, V. A. 1966: *The Play Called Corpus Christi*. Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Mackinnon, E. 1931: Notes on the Dramatic Structure of the York Cycle. *Studies in Philology* 28: 433-49.
- Mill, A. J. 1948-51: The Stations of the York Corpus Christi Play. *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 37: 492-502.
- Nelson, A. H. 1970: Principles of Processional Staging: York Cycle. *Modern Philology* 67: 303-20.
- Potter, L. ed 1983: *Medieval Drama, The Revels History of Drama in English*. vol. I, London, Methuen.
- Rose, M. 1961: *The Wakefield Mystery Plays*. London, W. W. Norton & Company.
- Stevens, M. 1972: The York Cycle: From Procession to Play. *Leeds Studies in English* 6: 37-115.
- Stevens, M. 1987: *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Twycross, M. 1978: "Places to Hear the Play": Pageant Stations at York, 1398-1572. *Records of Early English Drama Newsletter* 2: 10-33.
- White, E. 1987: Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York. *Medieval English Theatre* 9.1: 23-63.
- Woolf, R. 1972: *The English Mystery Plays*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.



Appendix. Fig.1: York pageant route and stations for the York Corpus Christi Play in 1468 by M. Twycross (1978 & Beadle, 1982: 34).

\* † \*