

Play Production in Medieval York

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The production of plays in medieval York is a topic of interest not only to students of English drama of the period but all who find outdoor theatrical entertainment a source of fascination. The citizens of York enjoyed a wide range of such entertainments, from the fully fledged drama of the Corpus Christi Play to the less formal ridings of characters like St George and the Dragon and Yule and Yule's wife.

The civic documents of York from the medieval period contain a great deal of information about the organization of these entertainments.¹ The most well documented is the Corpus Christi Play, which was performed in the city between 1376 and 1569. The time span is almost two hundred years. During this time, the play maintained its popularity and its basic form, although the text itself was revised and amended.

The play was a free entertainment for everyone in the city. York's population varied between 11,000 in 1377 and about 8,000 in the mid sixteenth century. Any member of the population could see the play, so the audience could include the poorer citizen as well as the more affluent. At times it was seen by visiting royalty.

The play was finally lost to the people of York not because its popularity waned or because it was superseded by a different form of drama, but simply because its Roman Catholic nature could not be tolerated by the state. The citizens asked the York city council to authorise a performance as late as 1580, but their requests could not be granted because of official disapproval.

The amount of information in the records about the production of the Corpus Christi play has given rise to much scholarly debate about the details of production. Because a text of the play has also survived,² there have been modern presentations which have attempted to reproduce some aspects of what the medieval outdoor performances

1. A full collection of these documents has been edited by A.F. Johnston and M. Rogerson, *Records of Early English Drama: York*, Toronto, 1979.

2. The most recent edition of the text is by R. Beadle, *The York Plays*, London, 1982.

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might have been like. For example, there was a performance in Leeds in 1974 set in a medieval market fair atmosphere and in Toronto in 1977 there was a performance on moveable pageant wagon stages.

The medieval presentation was a large scale undertaking which involved the cooperation of the craft guilds under the general authority of the York city council. The play was presented frequently over the time of its known existence, but not every year. In some years it had to be cancelled because there was plague and the council did not wish to encourage large gatherings of people. In some years it was replaced by a performance of another religious play, either the Creed or Pater Noster Play. In other years no large scale dramatic performances appear to have been planned at all. When it was performed, it was presented on Corpus Christi day, which fell between 21 May and 24 June. At this time of year the weather was likely to have been suitable for outdoor entertainment. The play was closely associated with the celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi and was seen as a suitable way of honouring God and reaffirming the presence of Christ. It is frequently described in the civic documents as being presented 'in honour and reverence of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the glory and benefit of the ... city'.³

Before 1468, the play and the religious procession of Corpus Christi took place on the same day, but this proved to be too unwieldy and there was a move to have the play presented on the day after Corpus Christi Day. The result of the official debate on the matter was that the play remained on the festival day and the procession was relegated to the following day. This is a clear indication of the esteem in which the play was held, not only as a dramatic celebration but also as a fitting celebration of the religious occasion.

The play was divided into episodes. In the surviving text there are 48 episodes covering biblical history from the Creation to the Last Judgement. Christ was the central figure of the total play. Old Testament episodes such as *Abraham and Isaac* and *Noah's Flood* were chosen because they prefigured the Crucifixion and directed the focus of the play towards Christ.

Each episode was presented by a specific craft guild in York. The guilds and the episodes assigned to them in the manuscript are as follows:

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| 1. The Tanners | The Creation of Heaven and Earth and the Fall of the Angels |
| 3. <i>Records</i> , p.697. | |

2. The Plasterers	The Five Days of Creation
3. The Cardmakers	The Creation of Adam and Eve
4. The Fullers	Adam and Eve and the Tree of Knowledge
5. The Coopers	The Fall of Man
6. The Armourers	The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden
7. The Glovers	Cain and Abel
8. The Shipwrights	The building of Noah's Ark
9. The Fishmongers and Mariners	Noah's Flood
10. The Parchmentmakers and Bookbinders	Abraham and Isaac
11. The Hosiers	Moses and Pharaoh
12. The Spicers	The Annunciation to Mary of the Birth of Christ
13. The Pewterers and Founders	Joseph's Troubles about Mary
14. The Tilehatchers	The Nativity
15. The Chandlers	The Adoration of the Shepherds
16. The Masons	Herod
17. The Goldsmiths	The Adoration of the Three Kings
18. The Hatmakers, Masons and Labourers	The Purification of Mary
19. The Marshals	The Flight into Egypt
20. The Girdlers and Nailers	The Massacre of the Innocents
21. The Spurriers and Lorimers	Christ and the Doctors in the Temple
22. The Barbers	The Baptism of Christ
23. The Smiths	The Temptation of Christ in the Desert
24. The Carriers	The Transfiguration of Christ
25. The Cappers	The Woman Taken in Adultery and the Raising of Lazarus
26. The Skinners	Christ's Entry into Jerusalem
27. The Cutlers	The Conspiracy to Betray Christ
28. The Bakers	The Last Supper
29. The Cordwainers	The Agony and Betrayal of Christ in the Garden
30. The Bowers and Fletchers	The Trial of Christ by Annas and Caiaphas
31. The Tapeters and Couchers	The First Trial of Christ by Pilate and the Dream of Pilate's Wife
32. The Dyers	The Trial of Christ by Herod
33. The Cooks and Watercarters	The Remorse of Judas
34. The Tilemakers	The Second Trial and Condemnation of Christ by Pilate
35. The Shearmen	Christ on the Road to Calvary
36. The Pinners	The Crucifixion
37. The Butchers	The Death of Christ
38. The Saddlers	Christ's Harrowing of Hell

39. The Carpenters	The Resurrection
40. The Winecarters	The Appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene
41. The Woolpackers and Woolbrokers	The Appearance of Christ at the Supper at Emmaus
42. The Scriveners	The Appearance of Christ to Doubting Thomas
43. The Tailors	The Ascension of Christ
44. The Potters	The Descent of the Holy Spirit
45. The Drapers	The Death of Mary
46. The Weavers	The Assumption of Mary
47. The Innkeepers	The Coronation of Mary
48. The Mercers	The Last Judgment

The individual episodes were performed outdoors in the streets on pageant wagons. Each guild had its own wagon and was responsible for its upkeep.

Each guild had to finance and administer its own episode, but in total the play came under the jurisdiction of the city council. When the mayor and aldermen decided that a performance was to take place, they issued notices to the guilds giving them about fifteen weeks to prepare.

The council exercised strict control over the quality of the performance. In 1476, a council ordinance was passed giving the mayor the power to appoint four of the most 'skilled, discerning and able players' in the city to 'inspect, hear and examine all the plays and players'. They were to allow those they found worthy to perform, but 'all other insufficient persons, either in skill, voice or appearance' they were to 'discharge, remove and dismiss'.⁴

The council also decided where the performance was to take place. The play was performed in procession at a number of playing 'stations' in the major streets of the city. The stations were usually at street intersections, outside churchyards or in squares to allow for large groups of people to assemble to see the play (see map). The stations were rented by individual citizens who had the right to build viewing platforms at the site and charge admission. On average, twelve stations were offered for rent. Before the performance, officials placed civic banners at the stations to authorize presentation of the episodes at those places.

The guild management provided for the upkeep of the wagon and playing gear, the rehearsals, and any necessary payments associated with

4. *Records*, p.109.

the presentation. Sometimes payments were made for producers and actors, although none of these were 'professionals' in the modern sense. Annual levies were made on the members of the guilds to go into the funds for presenting their episodes. A portion of fines extracted for infringement of guild rules also went into these funds. Special amounts had to be paid when a master craftsman set up shop or took apprentices. If a single guild did not have sufficient funds to cover the costs of its episode, they could be granted funds by the council from another guild which did not present an episode. 'Pageant masters' administered the funds and looked after the wagon and the gear associated with the performance. Most guilds had two to four pageant masters. This position was seen as the first step on the ladder of promotion to Master of the guild, the top position in the guild organization. Each year the pageant masters had to present their accounts to the guild at a reckoning dinner which they arranged. This dinner became a tradition which continued well into the seventeenth century, long after the Corpus Christi Play ceased to be performed.

The pageant wagons on which the episodes were performed had to be stored. Many guilds owned their own 'pageant house' or rented one from another guild or from the council. Much of the superstructure of the wagons could have been taken apart for easy storage. From what is known of the size of the 'houses' in which they were stored it is unlikely that the playing floor of the wagons was more than two metres by four metres. Different episodes would have required different wagons and properties. The one belonging to the Mercers, *The Last Judgment* wagon, is well documented and is known to have been a very elaborate stage, as was befitting for the grand finale of the play. The Mercers had a complicated superstructure to represent heaven where mechanical angels were activated at appropriate moments. The wagon also had a separate hell mouth and fine costumes and properties. A total of twenty angels decorated the Mercers' stage. Other guilds which had less money would also have had less need for an elaborately decorated wagon because of the lesser demands of their episode. The episode of *Christ and the Doctors in the Temple*, for example, would not have required as fine a wagon as the one needed by the Mercers.

All the guilds were proud of their contribution to the Corpus Christi Play. The wagons carried the insignia of the guilds and were closely associated with them. Even the subject matter of some episodes can be seen to be associated with the trade, for example the Shipwrights performed *The Building of Noah's Ark* and the Goldsmiths *The Adoration of the Three Kings*. This was a community based activity and the

performance of the guild reflected on its standing in that community. In 1431 the Masons complained to the council that the episode they were responsible for at that time, *The Death of the Virgin*, was causing them distress. It contained an incident in which a Jew was maimed after he disrespectfully struck the Virgin's bier. This apocryphal material caused laughter and derision rather than devotion. Worse still, it caused fights to break out in the audience and the subsequent delays in the performance meant the Masons were still performing after dark. It was both dishonourable and inconvenient to the guild and the council allowed them to take over the Herod episode from the Goldsmiths who at that time were complaining because they had two episodes and were finding the costs too great.⁵ The problems of the Masons and the Goldsmiths make it clear that the guilds took their responsibilities very seriously and that their performance in the play was a matter of deep concern.

On the day of the performance, the guilds were ordered to assemble on Toft Green, near the beginning of the route of the play, at about 4.30 in the morning. The wagons were moved from one station to the next by man power and it was the duty of members of the individual guilds to take turns at this task. They were told that they had to move swiftly from one station to the next. The performance had to be repeated at each of the official stations. At Trinity Church, the first station, the plays were scrutinized by the common clerk who checked them against the official council copy of the text. It is not known what the penalty was if the guilds were found unworthy, but it can be assumed that the council would not allow any offending group to perform in the next year of the play without further investigation.

The mayor and his fellow aldermen saw the performance at the Common Hall, station 8. During the progress of the play they enjoyed a sumptuous feast at the expense of the community. The lady mayoress and the aldermen's wives had a similar feast at their traditional vantage point on the Pavement, station 12. As the play was a long one which went on all day and well into the twilight, all members of the audience would have had to refresh themselves with food and drink to last the distance. Because the length of the texts of the individual episodes varied considerably, there would have been breaks between episodes as long ones followed shorter ones. During these breaks both actors and audience could rest.

The play had not only the sanction of the community but also that of the church. The Dean and Archbishop had a traditional place for seeing

5. *Records*, pp.732-2.

the play at the Minster Gates, station 10. But when the old religion fell out of favour, the authorities at the Minster became adversaries of the religious plays which had entertained the citizens of York for so many years. They seized the texts of the Creed and Pater Noster Plays and never returned them to their rightful owners. Fortunately for posterity, the text of the Corpus Christi Play, although requested by the Archbishop, was not handed over to him.

The civic documents and the play text allow for the recreation of a view of the performance, from the initial planning to the final presentation. Much can be learnt from accounts of other dramatic activities in the city. In 1486 a magnificent show was devised for the arrival of Henry VII at York.⁶ Dramatic scenes with speeches by Ebrauk, the founder of the city, David, Solomon and Our Lady were prepared to please and flatter the monarch. The detailed account of this royal entry indicates that the king took the same route through the streets as was customary for the Corpus Christi Play. The route must have been a proven success for the spectators. He stopped at some of the traditional stations of the play to see the scenes prepared in his honour. Many of these scenes required intricate machinery which made flowers spring up and open and snow to fall on the street. Such details help the modern scholar to piece together the expertise of the medieval presenters of outdoor drama.

Some further evidence may yet come to light. In 1970, when the city was preparing for a royal visit by Elizabeth II, some medieval documents were found in the vault of a firm of York solicitors who, in the spirit of the celebrations, were tidying for the queen. One of these previously unknown documents contained the fullest description of a pageant wagon and its machinery and properties yet known. It is possible that further discoveries will still be made, not in York perhaps, but in other towns where medieval documents survive. The *Records of Early English Drama* Series edited by Professor Alexandra Johnston of the University of Toronto and published by the University of Toronto Press is encouraging scholars to make collections of material which will expand knowledge of the production of plays in medieval England.

6. *Records*, pp.137-43.

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