THE STAGING OF THE YORK CORPUS CHRISTI PLAY

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This study reaffirms the traditional theory of processional staging of the cycle of plays, collectively known as the Corpus Christi Play, that was performed at York in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Because comparative studies of the various cycles are of little value, this thesis focuses on an examination of surviving civic records, as well as current scholarship, to confirm that the plays at York were performed processionally. An analysis of the relationship between the liturgical Corpus Christi procession and the Play indicates that the two, although concurrent, were separate events.
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INTRODUCTION

The primary weakness of most early studies of English mystery plays has been to regard the four great cycles, as well as the other extant plays, as though all developed and were performed under the same circumstances. The traditions, formulated early in this century by E. K. Chambers and Karl Young, were reinforced as recently as 1955 in Hardin Craig's *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages*, and are still to be found in most literary histories.¹ The cycle plays were thought to be outgrowths of twelfth-century tropes, or vernacular embellishments of the liturgy of the Mass. Originally enacted in church, the plays eventually became too lengthy and involved for performance in the church aisles and were moved to the churchyard. Later, as comic touches were added, the plays were considered too "secular" to be associated with the Church, and passed from the hands of the clergy to the laity, becoming the responsibility of the craft guilds. As time passed, more and more plays based on biblical events were written, ultimately forming cycles that related events from Creation to Doomsday. These plays, according to early scholars, were crude and clumsy attempts at drama, lacking in artistic merit, though not without quaint elements of folk humor. They were thought to have flourished throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,
but gradually died out in the sixteenth century owing to an increasing decline of interest on the part of the guilds.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of these cycle plays, according to the traditional view, was their method of production. Early in the fourteenth century, the cycles became associated with the newly-established feast of Corpus Christi, an ideal date of performance, because that particular feast, celebrated at approximately midsummer, generally afforded good weather and sufficient daylight. Elaborate processions were an important part of the feast, and, in imitation, the cycles began to be performed according to a technique now generally known as processional. Plays were performed on perambulatory stages known as pageants, drawn about the city to various stops, or stations. Spectators thus might remain at a single station and view all the plays. Performances began at dawn and ended before dusk.

In recent years, these traditions of the origins of cycle drama have largely been put aside. The plays can no longer be dated so early; no texts survive from the transitional period between tropes and cycles, and, throughout England, the earliest references to the plays are from the last quarter of the fourteenth century. The plays probably cannot be dated much earlier than this. It would also seem that, at York at least, the cycle plays were never the responsibility of the clergy, but were always controlled by the civic government and the craft guilds. Moreover, the
plays did not simply die out as an archaic institution in the sixteenth century. Harold C. Gardiner's study of the demise of the cycle plays concluded that they were suppressed by the Reformation at the height of their popularity. This theory has fostered an entirely new attitude toward the plays. The most recent trend has been to regard cycle drama as "potentially vital and effective throughout its life, not as a curious relic of a dead past." The notion of processional staging of the cycle plays is somewhat dependent on the traditional theory of their origin; with this theory discounted, doubt has been cast on the possibility of such staging. In this area, comparative studies of the cycles are of little value. The plays were staged under different circumstances at each location. Of the four surviving cycles, the York Cycle is probably the most closely identified with processional staging. The pageant route at York has changed very little since the sixteenth century, and many performance sites are still identifiable. However, recent criticism has effectively argued, largely on the basis of the impracticality of processional staging, in favor of a single fixed performance of the cycle. Several of the most prominent scholars in the area of medieval drama, including Martin Stevens, Alan H. Nelson, and Clifford Davidson, have proposed this alternative form of staging, with the result that processional staging is at present generally discounted. However, examination of the
surviving York records strongly indicates that the performance of the York Cycle most closely approximated processional staging. The standard theory must nonetheless be qualified, by examination of the records as well as other external evidence.

The York Cycle, or, as it is identified in contemporary accounts, the Corpus Christi Play (hereafter referred to as "the Play"), consists of forty-eight plays, or pageants. It should be pointed out that, originally, "pageant" referred to the wagon stages used in processional performances. By the fifteenth century, however, the term was also applied to the individual episodes performed. The term's two meanings are often difficult to distinguish, both in medieval accounts and in modern scholarship. In this study, "pageant" will generally be used to designate the individual plays of the cycle. These plays survive in British Museum Additional MS 35290, also known as the Ashburnham manuscript, after the family that once owned it. The manuscript appears to have been an official register of the plays compiled by civic authorities. Lucy Toulmin Smith, who prepared the only existing edition of the plays, dated the manuscript between 1430 and 1440, but it is now generally believed to come from much nearer the end of the fifteenth century. The plays of the register probably date from mid-fifteenth century; they certainly cannot be much earlier. It is impossible to speculate on the precise age of the Play, or its nature prior to
the compilation of the register. Its authorship is, of course, unknown, although several plays of the Passion sequence can be attributed, on the basis of style and language, to a single author generally known as the York Realist.

The pageants of the Play were produced by the craft guilds under the jurisdiction of the civic government. The Play was an important civic event, as well as a source of considerable income, and various ordinances regulated its performance. The city established the pageant route and indicated the stations, designated by official banners. Pageant assignments to the various guilds were dictated by the mayor and his council, and participation was required by law. Those guilds failing to comply with such ordinances as assembling at the proper time or performing at established stations were subjected to heavy fines. The city government, however, was not unreasonable in these matters. Pageant assignments were apparently made according to guild capabilities, and were frequently altered to fit circumstances. Guild members were also required to participate in the civic Corpus Christi procession, wearing guild livery and bearing torches.

The craft guilds were carefully organized, each usually headed by a master and two to four "searchers," who were among the most important members of the crafts; they made certain that "the ordinances of the craft were adhered to, that substandard workmanship was guarded against, and that
no outsiders practised the skills of their craft."\(^9\) Those guilds that were responsible for a pageant of the Corpus Christi Play also annually elected members to serve as pageant masters. These officials were generally chosen the week following Corpus Christi and were charged with the duty of collecting the "pageant silver" throughout the year from the guild members in order to support and maintain their pageant. This "pageant silver" was derived from three sources:

(i) yearly contributions from members of the craft, from nonmembers who gained part of their income by practising the skills of the craft, and from other crafts which did not own pageants; (ii) special payments made by a man when he entered his apprenticeship; (iii) a percentage, usually half, of fines levied for breaking craft ordinances (the other half went to the city treasury) (YR, I, xiv).

Pageant masters were also responsible for supervising the performance of their pageant on Corpus Christi day. They ensured that the pageant got underway smoothly, and they accompanied it for the entire pageant route.

Participation by guild members in such religious events as the Corpus Christi procession and Play was not at all unusual. Most guilds were involved in other religious functions. Many members also belonged to religious guilds, which existed primarily to instill devotion to a patron saint or cause (YR, I, xiv). Two of these guilds produced plays. The Corpus Christi Guild was formed to foster greater dedication to the sacrament of the Eucharist, and, among its
other functions, produced the Creed Play. The Pater Noster Guild was established primarily to produce the Pater Noster Play. These Plays did not survive the Reformation, but some information is known about them. Apparently both were cycles like the Corpus Christi Play. The Creed Play consisted of twelve pageants, in which each of the Apostles discoursed on a tenet of the Apostles' Creed. The Pater Noster Play appears to have been a series of morality plays on the Seven Deadly Sins, and presented the Lord's Prayer as well. Mentioned in a treatise by Wyclif in 1378, it is the oldest play referred to in English. All surviving records indicate that both the Creed Play and the Pater Noster Play were staged in the same manner as the Corpus Christi Play, though less frequently.¹⁰

It is my intention to prove that the York Cycle was performed processionally, and in doing so, I shall examine the major problems with this type of performance, as well as discussing some of the proposed alternative means of staging. One of the most difficult problems, the relationship of the Play to the Corpus Christi procession, has been the subject of considerable speculation. Records must be analyzed to determine whether the Play originated as a part of the procession or whether the two were separate events. Examination of contemporary accounts will also form the basis for my arguments in support of processional staging. After establishing the mode of performance of the Corpus Christi Play, I
shall discuss the pageant route and stations, as well as the possible appearance of the pageant stages. This study will then conclude with a brief discussion of the need for further scholarship.
NOTES


3 Margaret Dorrell, "Two Studies of the York Corpus Christi Play," Leeds Studies in English, 6 (1972), 63-111.

4 Harold C. Gardiner, Mysteries' End (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1946).

5 Kahrl, p. 9.


7 Kahrl, p. 19-20.


9 Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, Records of Early English Drama: York (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), I, xiv. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as YR. Italics in all citations indicate editorial expansions of common abbreviations. Editorial interpolations of Johnston and Rogerson appear in parentheses. Brackets, as well as containing my editorial comments, indicate that the manuscript has been erased or damaged. Canceled or erased letters, if still legible, are reproduced; damaged or obliterated letters are indicated by periods. Original punctuation has been retained. Latin and Anglo-Norman citations appear in translation.

CHAPTER I

ALTERNATE VIEWS OF STAGING

The most serious problem posed by processional staging is the amount of time involved. The York Cycle is the longest of the four cycles—the surviving register contains forty-eight plays, and there were once as many as fifty-seven. These existing plays comprise some 13,121 lines. Various estimations have been made of the cycle's performance time. Alan H. Nelson maintains that a processional performance according to traditional standards would have taken thirty-eight hours.¹ James F. Hoy proposes a figure of twenty-three hours,² and Margaret Dorrell Rogerson suggests twenty hours. Subsequent discussion will determine which of these estimates is the most accurate; at present, it is sufficient to note that even the most conservative estimate argues for a performance lasting well beyond nightfall.

It is clear from the York records that the Corpus Christi Play was performed during the course of a single day. And, at least until 1426 (and probably for some time after), the Play was preceded by a religious procession, a devotional service for the feast of Corpus Christi, during which the consecrated Host was carried through the streets of York. In 1426, a sermon preached by visiting friar William Melton
persuaded the council to pass an ordinance to hold the procession and Play on separate days. The separation ultimately took place, but there is no evidence that this occurred before 1468. \(^4\) Estimated lengths for this procession have ranged from one to five hours, and although several discussions have been aimed at the relationship between the procession and Play, there has been no real assessment of the total time involved when both Play and procession took place on the same day.

Nelson was among the first to attempt an accurate estimate of the actual length of the Play. Earlier studies had attempted to determine the length of the cycle by calculating the length of an average play. \(^5\) Such studies failed to point out, as Nelson did, that the irregular lengths of the plays must necessarily have prolonged the overall length of the production. When a short play followed a longer one, it was forced to wait at each station after performing until the next station was clear. This time discrepancy caused periods of inactivity for both actors and audience. \(^6\) The most obvious solution would have been to require that all plays be approximately the same length, so that each play might advance at a uniform speed. Yet this apparently was never the case, as plays vary in length from eighty-six to five hundred forty-six lines. \(^7\)

Nelson's calculations for the overall length of the Play rely on a complicated time scheme based on the number
of lines. He believes that the performance rate for a play in Middle English would be one thousand lines per hour. Besides the length of each pageant in lines, he estimates one hundred lines (approximately six minutes) for the pageant to travel to the next station, plus an additional twenty lines (one minute twelve seconds) to set up for its performance.

The time calculations for the Play begin thus:

The time lapse at the beginning of the production is zero. The time lapse at the end of the first York play at the first station, measured by lines, is 160. Since 20 lines are required for the second play to set up after the first play is finished, the time lapse for the beginning of the second play at the first station is $160 + 20 = 180$. Similarly, since 100 lines are required for a journey, the first play will begin to perform at the second station after a time lapse of $160 + 100 = 260$. This accumulative reckoning is continued for all plays at all stations.

According to these calculations, a processional performance making use of twelve stations (the number generally used at York) would be 21,321 lines long. However, Nelson points out that the virtual length of the production is not the only problem to be considered. He notes:

... the length of the cycle varies considerably at different stations. At the first station the virtual length of the cycle is 14,214 lines; at the third, 14,987 lines; and at the last, 18,461 lines. By clock time, the cycle lasts about four and a quarter hours longer at the last station than at the first. The reason for this is that the first play, being shorter, can advance much faster than the longest play.

Because of the incongruities in the lengths of the pageants, lengthy gaps of time occur between performances, particularly at the later stations. Nelson observes, "ranging from
several minutes to one hour and forty minutes, and longer in every case at the last station than at the third, these gaps prevent the audiences from seeing an uninterrupted production."11

Nelson proposes that the plays began at 5:00 a.m. His estimate is based on the well-known 1415 requirement that all actors assemble with their pageant wagons at 4:30 on the morning of Corpus Christi (YR, I, 25). According to his calculations, the Play could not have been performed in less than twenty-one hours, and, more likely, would have taken some thirty-eight hours. Arguing that his calculations are sufficient to prove that the cycle could not possibly have been performed processionally, he also points to other factors that would have lengthened the Play.12 While he makes no attempt to determine the duration of the Corpus Christi procession, he does point out that in the years when it occurred on the same day as the Play, the beginning of the Play would have been delayed considerably past five o'clock. The stations of the Play were generally limited to twelve, but the number ranged in various years from ten to seventeen, obviously altering the length of the production. And there is, of course, no possibility of determining the length of the cycle when it contained fifty-seven pageants.

The major flaw in Nelson's argument is that his calculations of performance time are based on the number of lines per play, "thus totally ignoring the dramatic requirements
of stage action, music, and the like. Yet, his questioning of the standard theory is valid, and his refutation has been almost overwhelmingly accepted, leading the way for further study of the Play's staging. Nelson has proposed an alternative method of staging, which will be discussed later in this chapter. However, a few of the other problems entailed by traditional processional staging must first be examined.

As already mentioned, no study of the performance time of the Play has made any real attempt to determine the length of the Corpus Christi procession and its effect on the length of the Play. This inconsistency has often led to the impression that the two took place "in competition" with one another. The relationship of the procession and Play, one that obviously must be analyzed further, will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Processional staging has always been considered a means of continuous performance, yet Nelson has established that the unequal lengths of the plays created waiting periods for both actors and audiences. What did the audience do during these pauses? Perhaps, as Rogerson has suggested, they used this time to eat and drink. Perhaps the pauses served as welcome periods of intermission, as one of the strongest objections of modern critics is that audiences could not have been willing to endure a performance that lasted several hours without stopping. Such pauses might also provide
relief for the actors, who would naturally be fatigued by twelve (or more) consecutive performances. At the same time, however, many of the pauses would have been of sufficient length to disrupt both the continuity of the performance and the thematic unity of the cycle.

As mentioned above, actors were required by a 1415 ordinance to assemble promptly at 4:30 on the morning of the Play:

And that euery player that shall play be redy in his pagiaunt at conveyant tymę, that is to say at the mydhowre betwix iiiijth & vth of the cloke in the mornynge & then all oyer pageantes fast folowyng ilkon after oyer as yer course is without Tarieng (YR, I, 25).

To a modern audience, a performance beginning at 4:30 seems extraordinarily early, but as Hoy points out, "that early hour was not at all unreasonable to medieval Yorkers, for the town bell rang for fifteen minutes at 4:00 a.m. in the summer and at 5:00 a.m. in winter. Evidently, the citizens of York were early risers." He further observes that the plays might have easily begun earlier, for in northern England at midsummer it would have been light for nearly an hour before the pageants were required to assemble. But, accepting the early starting time, why were all the pageants required to be present? It is obvious why the earlier pageants should be assembled and ready to leave promptly, but if the Play was performed processionally, many of the pageants would not be needed for several hours.

There are, of course, a number of other minor aspects
of processional staging that have been difficult to resolve, and these have received considerable critical attention in recent years. It has long been held a difficult task to accurately place all the stations of the Play for all the years of its performance, but a recent study seems to have located many of them.\textsuperscript{17} Presumably, this study will provide answers to some of the problems related to performance on a movable stage. It is difficult to determine the size of the playing area, which had to be small enough to make its way down narrow and crowded streets, yet large enough to accommodate a scene such as the parting of the Red Sea in the Hosiers' pageant. Various estimates of the pageants' performing area suggest a size of approximately ten feet by twenty feet,\textsuperscript{18} but, as Hoy has noted, "the shape and size of the pageant wagons have not been definitely established."\textsuperscript{19} A document recently come to light concerning the Mercers' pageant wagon has been variously interpreted as evidence that the Play was performed processionally and as definite proof that it was not.\textsuperscript{20} At any rate, what evidence it provides concerns the Mercers' pageant wagon and not necessarily all others. More consideration of the physical difficulties of processional staging will be given in Chapter IV.

Nelson's analysis of the performance time of the York Cycle was a turning point in the criticism of medieval cycle drama. His expanded work on the staging of the mystery plays, \textit{The Medieval English Stage}, offers an entirely new
theory on the production of the Play at York. Although largely discredited, it will be presented here as one of the alternatives to processional staging offered in recent years.

Nelson argues that the Play developed from the Corpus Christi procession. This notion is not an entirely new one; early scholars often confused the two, but it has been generally believed that the two were separate events common to the same feast day. Nelson, however, holds that the Play as it survives did not exist until some time after 1426, the date of Friar Melton's famous sermon. Because there could not possibly have been time for processional staging of the extant cycle, the dramatic procession must have existed in some other form. Perhaps the plays were "mute tableaux, pageants introduced by short speeches, or a brief mimetic action." Such a procession of pageants might have easily followed the liturgical procession through the city, pausing at the various stations for viewing.

This theory of the development of the plays is one that merits further study, as others have pointed out. However, Nelson chooses not to consider it further, other than to observe that "the Corpus Christi play was essentially a civic as opposed to an ecclesiastical endeavor." In conjunction with this idea, he presents his theory of the actual staging of the Play.

It is Nelson's belief that the Play was never performed
out of doors. Nor was it seen by the citizenry of York. A dramatic procession of pageant wagons, preceded by the liturgical procession, made its way through the city on the morning of Corpus Christi. The mayor and his council watched the procession before Common Hall and then withdrew into the chamber at Common Hall, where the Play was performed for them and for visiting dignitaries. Nelson holds that a single indoor production would solve many of the problems posed by processional staging. Lighting for plays performed after dark would no longer be a problem, and stage properties could be more easily managed because of the larger playing area. An indoor performance could also avoid the possibility of bad weather. Most notably, the performance time would be considerably shortened by overcoming the "extraordinary irregularity of the various plays in the cycle."27

Nelson's theory is invalid for a number of reasons. Primarily, there is simply not enough evidence to point to an indoor production of the cycle. Performance for a handful of officials violates not only tradition, but all evidence of the Play's popularity with the citizens of York. Indeed, after the Reformation, the continual petitioning of the people for the Play often met with little more than official indifference, as exhibited by this 1580 request:

And nowe the Commons did earnestly request of my Lord Mayour and others this worshipfull Assemblee that Corpus christi play might be played this yere, wherapon my Lord Mayour [and theis] answered that he and his bretherin wold considre of their request (YR, I, 392-93).
Surely the citizens would not have petitioned so "earnestly" for a Play they had never been permitted to see.

Nelson's unique theory of indoor performance has been generally rejected, largely because of his misinterpretation of civic records. For example, Nelson cites a 1565 record in which the Innholders requested that they be relieved of their financial obligation toward their pageant. "This," he comments, "testifies to a lapse of confidence in the Corpus Christi play as a traditional event," apparently overlooking the fact that the Innholders' play, "The Coronation of Our Lady," had been suppressed in 1561. Nelson has been accused of misconstruing evidence to fit a preconceived thesis, but his greatest error seems to have been an incomplete consideration of his material. His reliance on inaccurate transcripts rather than actual records apparently misled him, and he was also hampered by the unavailability of newly discovered documents. However, his study definitely established that the mayor and his party witnessed the procession from a station at Common Hall gates in Coney Street. And his proposal for a stationary performance is gaining considerable acceptance.

Martin Stevens has offered a theory of staging that is probably the most plausible alternative to processional staging. Accepting Nelson's thesis that the Play was never performed processionally, he does acknowledge that there was some sort of dramatic procession at York. It originally
existed as a series of tableaux vivants in the liturgical procession of Corpus Christi. These tableaux began to expand and include some spoken parts, which naturally lengthened the procession. This inconvenience led to the decision in 1426 to separate the dramatic and liturgical processions. Because the two then took place on different days, there was room for the pageants to develop, but there was still not enough time for all of them to be performed processionally, even though the surviving cycle did not exist at this point.\(^{32}\)

Presumably, civic officials determined that a single stationary performance of the pageants was more desirable. The pageants were still drawn through the city to be viewed by those waiting at the various stations, but the general audience assembled in one place to see the Play.\(^{33}\)

Stevens suggests that this location was the Pavement. It is a logical choice—one of the city's two major market places, it was often the scene of civic events and could accommodate a large crowd. It was also traditionally the last stop of the pageant route.\(^{34}\)

The development of the dramatic procession to the plays of the extant register was a gradual one. As more time became available, and as the pageants grew in popularity, the guilds expanded them and made them more elaborate. The plays found in the existing register probably date from c. 1450, not the fourteenth century, as formerly believed.\(^{35}\)

The date of the York register substantiates this theory.
Although Lucy Toulmin Smith dated the register at 1430-40 and W. W. Greg at c. 1475, a recent study argues for a date "well into the last quarter of the fifteenth century." 36

Stevens' theory is the most plausible alternative to processional staging yet offered. It is conjectural, although as he points out, all the theories are, to some degree:

The fact is that the York civic records are frequently ambiguous and incomplete. Unquestionably many circumstances relating to the mystery plays are left unrecorded. Those who may object to my account will find that no other explanation, even the established one, is capable of documentation. 37

If there is no absolute verification of his theory in the evidence, there is also no absolute refutation. His argument is logical and solves most of the problems presented by the traditional theory.

Nelson's analysis of the performance time of processional staging and Stevens' reconstruction of the Play's production have been almost unanimously accepted and form the basis of most current discussion. A handful of scholars have chosen to take issue with these theories and have offered alternatives that accept the possibility of processional performance. I shall analyze these alternate theories after discussing the liturgical procession of Corpus Christi and Stevens' view that the Play evolved from it.
NOTES


5 Hoy, 6-7.

6 Nelson, 304.

7 Nelson, 309.

8 Nelson, 309-11.

9 Nelson, 311.

10 Nelson, 311.

11 Nelson, 311.

12 Nelson, 308-10.


15 Dorrell, 99.

16 Hoy, 13.


19 Hoy, 8.


25 Stevens, et. al., 403.


27 Nelson, The Medieval English Stage, p. 79.


29 Stevens, et. al., 406.


31 Johnston, rev. of The Medieval English Stage, 247.


33 Stevens, "From Procession to Play," 52.

34 Stevens, "From Procession to Play," 52-53.

35 Stevens, "From Procession to Play," 56-57.


37 Stevens, "From Procession to Play," 44.
CHAPTER II

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CORPUS CHRISTI

PROCESSION AND PLAY

The feast of Corpus Christi was a fairly late addition to the Church's liturgical calendar. Proposed by Urban IV in 1264 and confirmed by Clement V in 1311, it was established as a special devotion to the Eucharist—a second celebration of the feast of Holy Thursday but without the context of the Passion sequence. It was in part an outgrowth of a new attitude toward the Eucharist that developed during the Middle Ages. The Mass was no longer regarded as a participatory celebration but as a reenactment of the Passion only to be witnessed by the faithful. Because of a developing belief in the unworthiness of the individual, fewer people received communion and there was more emphasis on viewing the consecrated Host.

Celebration of the new feast met with considerable popularity. A special Office and a Mass, traditionally ascribed to Thomas Aquinas, were composed for the feast. But the most prominent feature of the feast was the development of the Corpus Christi procession. The consecrated Host, housed in a monstrance, was carried in procession about the community, stopping at various points to be viewed by the people.
First established at Cologne in 1279, observance of the procession had spread throughout Europe by the middle of the fourteenth century. Although the procession was the most obvious exhibition of devotion associated with the feast, the Church required that it be preceded by a Mass. The Host consecrated at the Mass was that carried in the procession so that the procession, rather than being disassociated from the Mass, became an extension of it. However, as will be shown, liturgical practices varied from place to place, and this sequence of events probably did not take place at York.

In some English towns, Corpus Christi day also became the occasion for the outdoor performance of plays based on biblical events. The feast was celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, and thus fell between May 23 and June 24. Because Corpus Christi was celebrated at approximately midsummer, early scholars such as Chambers believed that the plays were performed on this feast because the weather would have been suitable for outdoor performance and not because the contents of the plays were particularly applicable. Such a theory assumes that the plays antedated the feast, and therefore, the procession. It is based on the previously discussed theory that English cycle plays are outgrowths of twelfth-century vernacular embellishments of Church liturgy. However, the most recent critical trend proposes that at York the Play developed from the procession. Because the origins of the Corpus Christi Play have
not been ascertained, a reexamination of the relationship between procession and Play is necessary.

The feast of Corpus Christi was established at York in 1325: "They also decided to the honour of God that the feast of Corpus Christi be celebrated with a double office in the choir and at the altar henceforth" (YR, II, 688). The first mention of the procession is in 1388, some twelve years after the first record of the Play (YR, I, 5-6). The procession mentioned in the records and so often associated with the Play is only one of at least three processions that took place in York on Corpus Christi. Both the York Minster and the Benedictine Abbey of St. Mary held their own separate processions. However, the city of York was responsible for its own procession, which was governed by civic ordinances and required participation by members of the craft guilds, who were required to march in procession carrying torches. This procession was presumably always under the control of the city government, which bore some of the financial responsibility for it and fined guild members who refused to comply with regulations.

As a part of the cult of devotion to the Eucharist so prevalent in the Middle Ages, the Guild of Corpus Christi was instituted at York in 1408. Early scholars often assumed that it was responsible for both procession and Play, but it was actually a religious guild dedicated to encouraging devotion to the Eucharist. Its membership included
almost every resident of York and the surrounding area, including such prominent individuals as Richard, Duke of Gloucester, later Richard III, and his wife. Although members of the Guild marched in the procession "for the honour of God and of the city of York" (YR, II, 701), the Guild was established long after the procession and had no jurisdiction over it. Rather, it was "only one group out of many which took part in the procession." In its history, lasting nearly a century and a half, it took a more and more prominent place in the procession, ultimately providing the elaborate silver shrine that held the sacrament during the procession. However, the dissolution of the Guild in 1547 failed to affect the Corpus Christi procession, because at no point was the Guild responsible for the procession. According to Alexandra F. Johnston, "its participation was limited to honouring the sacrament and regulating its member priests who ordered and controlled the procession as part of its lavish celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi." The Guild also had no relation to the Corpus Christi Play. It did, however, produce its own play, the Creed Play, which has not survived.

The most important document concerning both procession and Play is the 1415 ordo paginarum ludi Corporis Christi, a list of the pageants of the Play and of torches in the procession. It also contains some of the basic orders for the organization of both procession and Play:
We command of the kinges be halue and the mayor & the shirefs of his citye that no man go armed in his citye with swords ne with carllill axes ne none other defences in disturbance of the kinges peace & play or hynderung of the procession of Corpus Christi and that they leave their hermes in their ines saufand knyghtes and squyers of wirship that awe haue swords borne eftir name of payne of forfeiture of paire Wapen & imprisonment of paire bodys and pat men pat brynges furth [...]

dacentes that play at the places that is assigned perfore and nowere elles of the payne of forfeiture to be rayzed that is ordayne at [... yat ys to say xl s And that men of craftes & all other men that fyndes torches that play com furth in array & in the manere as it [...]
& customed be fore his tyme noght haueying wapen [...] pers of the pageants and officers that are keepers [...] of payne of forfeiture of paire fraunchis and paire bodyes to prison (YR, I, 25).

A copy of this ordinance was first published by Smith in her edition of the York plays. Stevens and Rogerson published a corrected version along with a translation, and it also appears in the recently published edition of York dramatic records (YR, I, 16-25). The ordo lists fifty-one pageants, and a second list that follows contains fifty-seven, as well as a torch list for the procession. It has been suggested recently that the pageants mentioned in these lists, both numbering more than the forty-eight of the surviving register, were perhaps not plays at all, but tableaux vivants in the procession. However, it is clear that there was some kind of dramatic activity associated with Corpus Christi, beginning in the latter part of the fourteenth century. Rental for housing the pageant wagons is mentioned in a 1376 record, and a 1394 ordinance required that "all the pageants of Corpus Christi shall play in the places appointed from
ancient times and not elsewhere" (YR, II, 694). Whether the plays mentioned in these early records are those of the surviving register or something else entirely, is a matter of great debate. Resolution of the issue in part depends on a series of incidents occurring in 1426.

At least until 1426, both the Play, whatever it consisted of, and the procession took place on the feast of Corpus Christi. The Play was processional in nature, and it followed the civic procession for at least the initial part of the route. There are a number of records linking the two, including an account of a brawl that took place in 1419:

... various craftsmen of the Skinners' craft came and lodged the serious complaint that various craftsmen of the Carpenters and Cordwainers of the aforesaid city on the feast of Corpus Christi in the aforesaid years broke the burning torches as they were carried in the procession of the said feast before the body of Christ there present, and then dragged them down with their staves and Carlisle axes which they brought there, and committed other enormities, to the grave disturbance of the king's peace and to the hindrance of the play and procession of Corpus Christi (YR, II, 717-18).

The cause of this brawl is not recorded; however, it is important to note that the disruption in the procession impeded both procession and Play. The obvious inference is that the procession preceded the Play. If the pageants cited in the ordo paginarum are indeed the plays of the cycle, as early scholars believed, then the ordo's descriptions provide further proof that the civic procession and the Play took place together. But the clearest information is provided by an account of two 1426 council meetings,
dated June 6th and 10th, as recorded in the York A/Y Memorandum Book. These descriptions were first published in their entirety, along with translation, by Rogerson.¹³

The translated account appears here:

In the name of God, Amen. In accordance with a certain custom followed for many years and times, all the craftsmen of the city of York at their own expense have caused a certain sumptuous play of the Old and New Testaments compiled in different pageants to be performed every year, and put on at diverse sites of the aforesaid city on the feast of Corpus Christi; likewise, making a certain solemn procession then for reverence of the sacrament of the body of Christ, by beginning at the great doors of the Priory of the Holy Trinity of York and so going processionaly to the cathedral church of York and thence to the Hospital of St Leonard at York, the aforesaid sacrament having been left there, with the light of many torches and a great multitude of priests dressed in surplices preceding, and the mayor and citizens of York with a great abundance of other people flowing in following. On this matter, a certain very religious man, Brother William Melton of the order of Friars Minor, a professor of scripture and a most famous preacher of the word of God, coming to this city, has commended the said play to the people in several of his sermons, by affirming that it was good in itself and most laudable; nevertheless, he used to say that the citizens of the aforesaid city and the other foreigners coming in to it during the said festival, attend not only to the play on the same feast, but also greatly to feastings, drunkenness, clamours, gos- sipings, and other wantonness, engaging the least in the divine service of the office of that day and that, alas, for that cause, they lose the indulgences granted to them in that matter by Pope Urban IV of happy memory. That is, (he granted) to the faithful of Christ who shall attend the morning office of the same feast in the church in which that feast is being celebrated, (an indulgence of) one hundred days; to the faithful who shall attend the mass, the same; to those who shall attend the first vespers of this feast, likewise a hundred days; to those at second (vespers), the same; to those who shall attend prime, terce, sext, none, and the office of compline, forty days for each of those hours; to those who shall attend the morning and evening (offices), mass, and the offices of the aforementioned hours throughout the octave of this feast, one hundred
days for each day of the octave, as is more fully contained in the holy canons proclaimed by him. Therefore, it seemed good to this Brother William that this play should take place on one day and the procession on the other, so that the people could come together in the churches on the aforesaid feast and attend divine service for the consequent indulgences, and he persuaded the people of the city to this. [Here follow the names of those present at the meeting.] They were moved more readily by the words, exhortations, and healthful warnings of the aforesaid Brother William, and considering very correctly that it is not a transgression nor does it offend God if good be changed to better. Therefore, after a careful discussion among themselves of the matter already mentioned, they gave their unanimous and express consent that this matter should first be made public to the commons in the Common Hall and, after the common consent has been obtained, that the past observances should be changed for the better. About which, after the aforesaid mayor and the commons of this city had gathered in the same Common Hall on the tenth day of the aforesaid month of June in the aforesaid year, and after the solemn publication had been made there, it was ordered by common agreement that that solemn play which, as is said above, used to be played on the very feast of Corpus Christi from now on should be presented each year on the Wednesday which is the eve of the same feast, and that the procession should always be made solemnly on the day of the feast itself, so that the whole people then staying in the aforesaid city would be able (to be free) for matins, mass, vespers, and the other hours of the same feast religiously, and to partake in the indulgences quite graciously conceded by the said Roman pontiff, Pope Urban IV, in that regard (YR, II, 728-30).

This entry provides a clearer description of the relationship of procession and Play. Both began at the church of Holy Trinity, the procession preceding the Play. Members of the clergy led the procession, while the mayor and citizens followed the Host. There is also some indication of the public attitude toward both procession and Play. Although both were the responsibility of the city and the craft guilds, the Play was clearly a more secular institution.
The procession was a solemn affair, and although the Play was "good in itself and most laudable," its audience was equally interested in "feastings, drunkenness, clamours, gossipings, and other wantonness." When the decision to separate procession and Play was made, the procession, as the more appropriate celebration, was retained on the feast and the Play moved to the preceding day. But in later years, popular demand saw the Play again performed on Corpus Christi, while the procession took place on the following day.

Some critics, particularly Martin Stevens and Stanley J. Kahrl, have argued that the separation that took place was an even more involved one than is generally assumed. They insist that until 1426 at least, the Play was a part of the procession. There was no time for a performance of the plays as they survive; therefore, they existed only as some form of tableaux vivants in the procession. This procession, Stevens proposes, was very likely a civic riding much like those common to Corpus Christi celebrations on the Continent in which elaborate tableaux presented scenes from the Bible and saints' lives. While the descriptions of the York civic ridings hardly match the impressive display of these Continental ones, it would seem that "the procession in York during the early fifteenth century, when it combined dramatic spectacle and religious ritual, was similar to the Continental procession in all essential details."
The *ordo paginarum*, compiled by city clerk Roger Burton, is a detailed list of the pageants in existence in 1415. Stevens questions the need for such a list if, as is generally assumed, there were already existing copies of the plays. He observes that "the writing of such a detailed description would only make sense if there was no composite manuscript and if the Common Council, therefore, decided to set down an *ordo paginarum* as a guide to subsequent processions." The second list, dated c. 1420 and also compiled by Burton, is generally thought to be an indication of revision and expansion of the plays. This second list is much briefer in its descriptions than the first, and increases the number of pageants from fifty-one to fifty-seven.

Rather than evidence of revision of the plays, Stevens concludes that

... it seems much more likely that the second list ascribed to individual guilds the episodes for which they were responsible all along. With the likelihood that guilds combined their wagons and resources to represent composite scenes at the various stops along the route, the determination of individual guild responsibility was no doubt difficult. The process of amalgamating pageants was inevitable in the growth of the dramatic procession. Hence, despite the second list which attempts to particularize the responsibility of individual guilds, we read repeatedly in the York records of guilds that combined their efforts to present Corpus Christi pageants. Burton's earlier list, in fact, bears a closer resemblance to the register than does the second list. On this basis alone, we may reasonably conclude that the second list does not reflect essential changes in guild assignments and the dramatic substance of the procession. Nor does it, any more than the first list, describe the plays of the register.
Stanley J. Kahrl concurs with Stevens that the *ordo* "is more likely to be a description of the pageant wagons than of the plays themselves." A series of *tableaux vivants* in the procession, easily represented and understood, would be the obvious outgrowth of the biblical scenes so common to medieval art, and would be logical predecessors to the surviving plays. Kahrl suggests that the early procession, before the 1426 division, was something comparable to a modern-day parade:

Suppose that the Corpus Christi procession began with every pageant wagon in order as we have them in the surviving manuscript of the plays, every wagon stage carrying its performers, at five in the morning. Suppose that the procession advanced till all the stations were occupied by a play and that the procession then halted, at which time every pageant acted out its bit in full, having simply mimed it up until that point. When all had finished, all would move on.

Each play thus would be performed in its entirety at no more than two stations. Kahrl bases this estimate on a 1476 order:

And bat no plaier bat shall plaie in pe saide Corpus christi plaie be . conducte and Reteyned . to plaie . but twice [.] on pe day of pe saide playe And bat he or thay so plaing plaie . not . ouere twice pe saide day vpon payne of xl s. to forfeft vnto pe Chaumbre asoften tymes as he or pay shall be founden defautie in pe same (YR, I, 109).

This ruling, which has long puzzled scholars, is generally thought to apply to doubling in individual pageants. It has also recently been taken as evidence against the theory of processional staging, although it has never been interpreted in quite the manner that Kahrl suggests. His interpretation
offers a new possibility, but seems unlikely. As Stevens notes, "the prohibition, after all, twice directs itself specifically to the 'player,' not the 'play' or the pageant master, who was in charge of its progress through the city."²¹

Kahrl's theory allows for a sort of processional performance without the problems usually associated with it. In this form, the passing pageants would be visible to all the spectators. Those who paid for a seat at one of the stations would have a better view of the pageants and the opportunity to view a short performance.²² These pageants would be much shorter versions of the surviving plays. After the separation of procession and Play in 1426, the cycle was able to expand.

As observed, a portion of Kahrl's theory is based on a rather questionable interpretation of one particular document. Another flaw in his argument is essentially the same as that found in Stevens'--both depend on the supposition that the separation of procession and Play took place in 1426. However, records indicate that the separation occurred much later.

Kahrl's discussion of the procession as it existed before 1426 states that the most important part of the celebration was the Mass that followed it. Mass was the "culmination of the procession. Without the final celebration, the feast was pointless."²³ The procession, composed of
torches and pageants, would begin its journey around the city at 5:00 a.m. "This," Kahrl observes, "means that prior to 1426 there would have been great pressure for a total playing time of not more than six hours, that is, if there was to be time for Mass before noon." If it were definitely established that this was the actual sequence of events, then this argument would refute the possibility of processional staging. Although, as noted at the beginning of the chapter, the Church specified that the procession follow Mass, Corpus Christi celebrations in England generally reversed this order. This was certainly true of the procession of the York Minster. But the procession that was the responsibility of the city would not necessarily be governed by the same requirements as the other liturgical processions:

None of the statutes suggests that any liturgical function took place before the procession. Unless Matins and Lauds were said, by custom and statute, mass would not have been celebrated. At the time of the York procession, Matins was just beginning. It should be noted that Corpus Christi processions in England presume that the Host would be drawn from the reserved sacrament and not consecrated at a special mass before the procession. Such was probably the case at York.

Presumably, there was no Mass before the procession began. It also does not appear that there was any service following it, as "the statutes require no liturgical function at the conclusion." There may not have been such a time restriction as Kahrl supposes.

The separation of procession and Play took place not
because the Play was becoming too lengthy, but because it distracted people from the liturgical functions of the feast.\textsuperscript{27} The description of the 1426 decision makes a clear distinction between "procession" and "play." There is no evidence to indicate that the pageants were a part of the procession. Both Stevens' and Kahrl's theories of the Play's development depend on a separation of procession and Play in 1426. Stevens proposes that it took some fifty years for the Play to develop to its surviving form. However, civic and guild records indicate that until at least 1468, both procession and Play apparently continued to occur on the same day.

The pageants could not have been a part of the procession in York, even before 1426, because the procession and Play were at all times two separate events. It is true that both began at the same time and followed the same initial route. But it has been definitely established that the routes overlapped for only a short distance and then separated.\textsuperscript{28} The two could hardly be said to be competing with one another, when it is remembered that there were at least two other processions in the city on Corpus Christi. After the procession was moved to Friday, there existed the further complication of a possible saint's day procession produced by the Minster.\textsuperscript{29} The Corpus Christi procession and Play were simply two separate functions common to the same feast day.
If the Play did not develop from the procession, then how did it develop? Unfortunately, this question is not likely to be answered without the discovery of more contemporary evidence. Further knowledge of the Play's origins would provide important answers to the problems of the Play's staging.

The most recent theories regarding the Corpus Christi plays at York propose that they developed from tableaux vivants in the procession and were ultimately stationary in their performance. These theories, though somewhat lacking in documentation, are widely accepted because they solve many of the problems posed by traditional processional staging. The value of these theories lies chiefly in the investigation of long-established and unquestioned theories, particularly the confusing relationship between procession and Play. They have prompted a new examination of existing evidence. It will be seen in the following chapter that this evidence, although not precisely in accordance with the traditional theory, nonetheless points to the probability of processional performance.
NOTES


6 Johnston, 377.

7 Johnston, 378.

8 Johnston, 384.

9 Lucy Toulmin Smith, ed., York Plays (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), pp. xix-xxvii. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as YP.


11 Stevens, 49-50.


13 Dorrell, 72-75.

14 Stevens, 48.

15 Stevens, 49.
16 Stevens, 49.
17 Stevens, 52.
18 Kahr1, p. 32.
19 Kahr1, p. 45.
20 Stevens, 58, n. 12.
21 Kahr1, p. 46.
22 Kahr1, p. 43.
23 Kahr1, p. 45.
24 Cowling, pp. 7-8.
26 Dorrell, 75.

28 Cowling, p. 7.
CHAPTER III

PROCENSIONAL PERFORMANCE OF THE YORK CYCLE

The Corpus Christi Play was performed at York for well over a century and a half. It is extremely important that any study of the Play consider the fact that the cycle went through many changes during the course of its history. Although it remained essentially a story of man's redemption, from the Fall to Doomsday, there were constant revisions, as shown by the variations between the register, the two pageant lists compiled by Roger Burton, and various accounts in the York records. Along with this consideration, that the Play must have existed in a variety of forms, it should also be noted that there is no evidence that every pageant in the cycle was performed every year. It is the essence of the Play that remained unchanged, as well as its role in the life of the citizens of York--an odd mixture of devotion and merrymaking. It will be argued in this chapter that the various pageants always consisted of some sort of spoken dramatic activity as opposed to pantomime or tableaux vivants. And, despite Nelson's objections to the logic of a processional performance, it will be demonstrated that all contemporary accounts point to the probability of a station-to-station performance throughout the city. A consideration
of the pageant route and its various stations will establish that the Play was performed processionally throughout its history. It will also be shown that the craft guilds frequently combined their pageants in order to shorten the Play, and, presumably, its performance time, and employed pageant masters who were specifically required to attend to the pageants and ensure a smooth performance throughout the city. Evidence from the plays themselves also points to a processional rather than a stationary production. Finally, a new study calculating the length of the cycle demonstrates that Nelson's calculations are somewhat extreme. The account of the dawn-to-dusk processional performance, so popular with literary historians, must be qualified, but it has been demonstrated that a possible processional performance of the entire cycle of forty-eight plays would take far less than the thirty-eight-hour performance that Nelson posits.

The number of stations and their locations varied from year to year, but the pageant route is the same in all records from 1399 to 1569. It began at Holy Trinity Priory, near the Toft Green, where the pageant wagons were stored. It continued up Micklegate and across Ouse Bridge, and then turned left at Coney Street. At the end of Coney Street, near the Common Hall, it turned right on Stonegate and progressed to the gates of the York Minster. There it turned right on Petergate and continued to the final stop, the Pavement. The stations of the Play are first mentioned in
1394, and although the specific stations are not named, the route is clearly an established one:

On the same day it was agreed that all the pageants of Corpus Christi shall play in the places appointed from ancient times and not elsewhere, but just as they shall be prearranged by the mayor, the bailiffs, and their officers, so that if any pageant does otherwise, the members of the craft of the said pageant shall pay 6s 8d in the chamber of the mayor for the use of the commons (YR, II, 694).

Evidently the use of the established stations was not strictly adhered to, however. Only a few years later, in 1399, the council was forced to act on a complaint that the pageants were not being performed at the specified stations. Abuse of the pageant route resulted in an inability to perform the Play in a single day. The council, after hearing the complaint, took appropriate action, and the records thus contain the first description of the pageant route:

To the honourable men, the mayor and aldermen of the city of York, the commons of the same city beg that, inasmuch as they incur great expense and costs in connection with the pageants and plays of Corpus Christi day, the which cannot be played or performed on the same day as they ought to be, because the aforesaid pageants are played in so many places at considerable hardship and deprivation to the said commons and strangers who have travelled to the said city on the same day for the same purpose, that it please you to consider that the said pageants are maintained and supported by the commons and the craftsmen of the same city in honour and reverence of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the glory and benefit of the same city, that you decree that the aforesaid pageants be played in the places to which they were limited and assigned by you and the aforesaid commons previously, the which places are annexed to this bill in a schedule, or in other places from year to year according to the disposition and will of the mayor and the council of the Chamber, and that anyone who acts in contravention of the aforesaid ordinances and regulations shall incur a fine of 40s to be
paid to the Council Chamber of the said city, and that if any of the aforesaid pageants be delayed or held back through fault or negligence on the part of the players, that they shall incur a penalty of 6s 8d to the same Chamber. And they (the commons) beg that these aforesaid matters be performed, or otherwise the said play shall not be played by the aforesaid commons. And they (the commons) ask these things for the sake of God and as a work of charity for the benefit of the said commons and of the strangers who have travelled to the said city for the honour of God and the promotion of charity among the same commons.

Places where the play of Corpus Christi will have been played: first at the gates of Holy Trinity in Micklegate; second at Robert Harpham's door; third at John de Gyseburne's door; fourth at Skeldergate and North Street; fifth at the end of Coney Street opposite the Castlegate; sixth at the end of Jubbergate; seventh [at] Henry Wyman's door in Coney Street; eighth at the end of Coney Street next to the Common Hall; ninth at Adam del Brigg's door; tenth at the gates of the Minster of blessed Peter; eleventh at the end of Girdlergate in Petergate; twelfth on the Pavement.

And it has been ordained that the banners of the play with the arms of the city be delivered by the mayor on the eve of Corpus Christi, to be set in the places where the play of the pageants will be, and that each year on the day after Corpus Christi, the banners be returned to the Chamber to the hands of the mayor and chamberlains of the city and kept there for the entire year following, under penalty of 6s 8d to be paid to the needs of the commons by anyone who shall have kept the banners beyond the next day and shall not have given them up in the manner which is stated (YR, II, 697-98).

The Play was obviously quite long, as the entry states that it was becoming impossible to perform it in a single day. The establishment of the twelve stations, marked by official banners, seems to have eliminated the problem. Twelve remained the usual number of stations, although the city maintained the right to control the number of stations and their locations. The number of stations varied from ten in 1551 to seventeen in 1569.
Residents who were fortunate enough to have the pageants performed before their houses soon found that the Play could be a profitable affair. It became common to erect scaffolds at the stations and to charge the audience for their seats. In order to derive some revenue from this practice and to maintain a degree of competition among station holders, the city in 1417 decided to lease the stations of the Play:

All these, together with a multitude of other citizens, were gathered in the Common Hall on the seventh day of June, in the year of our Lord 1417, and in the fifth year of the reign of King Henry the fifth after the conquest of England, and although it may be contained in a certain ancient constitution or ordinance made at the time of Robert Talkan, formerly mayor of York, in the twenty-second year of the reign of King Richard the second, and although (it was) read through there concerning the play to be maintained on Corpus Christi in the city of York, viz, that all the pageants of the play called Corpus Christi Play be maintained and brought forth in their order by the crafts of the said city for the benefit of the citizens of the same city and of all strangers coming there on the aforesaid feast, especially for the honour and reverence of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the profit of the said citizens. And that the play of the individual pageants themselves shall be: [here follows the list of stations named in the 1399 ordinance, with some minor variations]. Nevertheless, the mayor, the honourable men, and the whole said commons, by their unanimous consent and assent, order [that] all those who receive money for scaffolds which they may build in the aforesaid places before their doors on public property at the aforesaid sites from those sitting on them shall pay the third penny of the money so received to the chamberlains of the city to be applied to the use of the same commons. And if they have refused to pay or agree upon a third penny of this kind or other (monies) with the chamber decently, that then the play be transferred to other places at the will and disposition of the mayor holding office at the time and of the council of the Chamber of the city. No one spoke against this kind of ordinance except only a few holders of scaffolds in Micklegate.
And furthermore, it was ordained by common consent that the embroidered banners of the Corpus Christi Play, with the arms of the city, be delivered yearly on the night before Corpus Christi to be placed in the places where the play of the pageants will be on the following day, and that each year these banners must be brought back without delay to the Chamber of the council of the city on the day after the said feast of Corpus Christi, to the hands of the mayor and chamberlains of the city, and they must be kept there for the entire next following year, under penalty of 6s 8d to be applied to the work of the commons by each and all who have kept these banners beyond that next day and have not given them up in the manner which is stated.

And indeed, because of the closeness of the said feast of Corpus Christi and the shortness of time, the said matter was not able to be committed to the aforesaid execution fully. Therefore, those assembled in the Chamber of the council on the twelfth day of June in the above said year of the lord and the king, considering that it would be improper and not to the profit of the commons that the said play be performed in the same certain places and in no other yearly, since everyone bear his charge towards the upholding of this play according to his estate, it was therefore unanimously ordained that for the benefit of the commons the places for the performance of the aforesaid play would be changed unless those before whose places the play used to be performed have paid whatever was enjoined yearly to the commons for having this, his individual profit, thus. And it was ordained that in all the years following while this play is played, it must be played before the doors and holdings of those who have paid better and more generously to the Chamber and who have been willing to do more for the benefit of the whole commons for having this play there, not giving favour to anyone for his individual benefit, but rather that the public utility of the whole of the commons of York ought to be considered. And the abovesaid reverend gentleman John Moreton, in the matter of his buildings, submitted himself completely to the disposition and ruling of the mayor and the council of the Chamber (as to) how much (he should pay) towards the abovesaid play for (having) the play before the gate of his house in the quarter of Micklegate and at other buildings of his in the city (YR, II, 713-15).

Leasing the stations to the highest bidders was obviously less complicated for all concerned. The payment of every
third penny collected would have required station lessees to keep records of their yearly revenue. Although the solution adopted was less complicated, the rejected alternative of third penny payments would have given some indication of the size of the audience at each station, a factor as yet undetermined.¹

Leasing the stations was obviously a profitable business. Many individuals leased the same stations year after year, and even contracted to lease stations for several years at a time in order to assure themselves of a profitable station.² Fathers often passed on station leases to their sons.³ Several individuals frequently joined together to lease a station, evidently still making a profit, to judge from renewals of partnerships.⁴

Not all the stations were leased for the same price at any time in the history of the Play. The stations receiving the highest bids were probably those that brought in the most income.⁵ The early stations in Micklegate were clearly the most popular and brought in the most revenue. The advantages of these stations are obvious: "An audience in Micklegate could see all the plays before the schedule had a chance to get too dislocated, while the actors were still fresh and in good voice. They would even have some of the holiday left for other pursuits."⁶ On the other hand, contrary to Stevens' suggestion of the Pavement as the ideal site for a fixed performance, that particular station, "which
one would have thought should be greatly in demand, seems mysteriously difficult to sell." It consistently brought in less revenue than the other stations, and in many years was not leased. Ultimately, no more attempts were made to lease it, as it was apparently an unpopular spot from which to view the Play. Although the Pavement could accommodate a large crowd, it would, as the last station of the pageant route, have many disadvantages. Performances would have begun and ended late, and, given the likelihood of various disruptions in the day's performance, the pageants by that point probably would have been off schedule. Exhausted actors would have been giving their final performance of the day. These factors would have made a seat at an earlier station more desirable. Popularity of some stations may also have been indicative of the prestige associated with various neighborhoods. While some stations were preferable because of their locations, it is not unlikely that many had their own individual advantages, including, as has been suggested, "quality of beer obtainable" and "comfort and stability of scaffolds." Station leases were most profitable for the city in the fifteenth century. Receipts dropped drastically in the sixteenth century. Anna J. Mill attributed the drop to two factors: "first, the comparative lack of competition for private ownership of scaffolds; second the growth of a system of official perquisites in the form of exclusive, or
Although the mayor and other officials were annually provided with a rent-free station near Common Hall, Rogerson feels that more serious problems led to the drop in revenue. Near the end of the fifteenth century, stations began to lease for smaller amounts, and many available stations had no bidders. Rogerson attributes the drop in receipts to a waning of the city's prosperity:

The city had ceased to be a centre of commerce and its wealth was considerably less than it had been in the previous century. It would seem likely that the reduction in amounts paid for the stations as well as the failure to lease all the available places were a result of the decline of the city as a trading centre.  

The stations, though leased by individuals, were at all times under the control of the city, which allowed individuals to contract for the stations at one time during each year, as exhibited by this 1554 ordinance:

Item that thofficers of every warde gyve warnyng that suche as woll haue pageantz played before their doores shall comme in and aggree for theym before Trunnytie Sonday next / or elles to have none And the places to be appoynted by disrecion of my Lord maiour accustomed (YR, I, 311).

Although twelve, the number set forth in the 1399 ordinance, was the usual number of stations, the city held the authority to change the number in any year, either to reflect popular demand, or as in 1551, out of necessity:

Assembled in the Counsell Chambre of Ousebrig of this Citie the day & yere above wrytten whan & where it was aggreed by the said presens that for soo moche as the sykenes hath ben latly within this Citie: and to avoyde somme [...] occasion [...] of lyk [...] this somar.
by reason of confluence and blyndyng [of] togiders of
every [of] sort of people at this Corpus christi playe
with [.....] long taryeng abowt it/ No moe pagiantes
shalbe played thys yere but [tenne] in tenne certayne
stations (YR, I, 298).

In 1569, the year of the last performance of the Play, the
city established seventeen stations. Presumably, this was
done in order to make the Play--performed less and less fre-
quently in these years after the Reformation--accessible to
a greater number of spectators.

Revenue from the stations is consistently recorded in
the York Chamberlains Rolls under the heading "Leases of
places to heare Corpus Cristi Play." The audience gathered
at the stations to hear spoken drama and not simply to view
elaborate tableaux vivants. As Rogerson points out, "there
is nothing to suggest that the spoken performances were
confined to brief extracts from the text at any of the
stations." Rather, evidence indicates that the perfor-
mance of the Play was always one of considerable length.
The 1399 ordinance quoted above relates that it had become
increasingly difficult to perform the Play in a single day.

In 1422, members of four different craft guilds came
before the mayor and council with a request to combine their
respective pageants and thus shorten the Play. Performance
time apparently was a continual problem, and the mayor and
council approved the guilds' action:

He who is ignorant of nothing knows, and the whole peo-
ple lament, that the play on the day of Corpus Christi
in this city, the institution of which was made of old
for the important cause of devotion and for the extirpation of vice and the reformation of customs, alas, is impeded more than usual because of the multitude of pageants, and unless a better and more speedy device be provided, it is to be feared that it will be impeded much further in a very brief passage of time. And the craftsmen of the Painters, Stainers, Pinners, and Latteners of the aforesaid city, formerly appointed separately to two pageants which must be performed in the aforesaid play, viz, one on the stretching out and nailing of Christ on the cross, and the other, indeed, on the raising up of the Crucified upon the Mount, knowing that the matter of both pageants could be shown together in one pageant for the shortening of the play rather profitably for the people hearing the holy words of the players, consented for themselves and their other colleagues in the future that one of their pageants should be left out from now on and the other maintained following what the mayor and the council of the Chamber wished to arrange. And upon this business the searchers and craftsmen of the aforesaid crafts came before Richard Russell, the mayor of York, the aldermen and other honourable men in the Council Chamber situated here on Ouse Bridge on the last day of January in the ninth year of the reign of King Henry the fifth after the conquest of England and presented to them their desire and intention as stated above, viz, [here follow the names of the craftsmen present at the meeting]. Wherefore, the aforesaid mayor, aldermen, and honourable men, receiving this kindly and commending the aforesaid craftsmen for their laudable proposal, ordered and ordained, on their own counsel and that of all the aforesaid craftsmen, that from this day forward the pageant of the Painters and Stainers should be thoroughly removed from the aforesaid play, and that the craftsmen of the Pinners and Latteners should take upon themselves the burden of performing in their pageant the matter of the speeches which were previously performed in their pageant and in the pageant of the Painters and Stainers, and that the Painters and Stainers each year should collect among themselves from the men of their craft 5s sterling yearly and pay them yearly to those who are the masters of the pageant of the Pinners and Latteners [at the time], yearly on the eve of Corpus Christi (YR, II, 722-23).

This instance was one of many in which two or more crafts chose to combine in order to produce a pageant. When the crafts joined together, they often called upon the city to
resolve differences that subsequently arose. In 1428, the Marshals and Smiths, who apparently jointly produced their individual pageants, settled "a lang stryfe and debate" when the city decreed

...bat pe sayd craftes suld hafe thair Serchours and thair serche and thayre pageant maisters yerely als pay hafe had in tymes passed and bat a man of the a crafte and a man of the tother crafte suld walke to gyder yerely and gedyr vppe thair pageant syluer of men of bathe craftes / and of thair bather costages bryng furthe pair bather playes (YR, I, 45).

In 1442, the crafts chose to produce only one pageant together: "Item it is ordaned bat pe Pageant of both pe saide craftes from nowe furth in pe play of corpus Christi be Ioyntly broght furth at pe costes of bothe pe said craftes" (YR, I, 60). By 1480, the two guilds were again producing two pageants at combined cost, and asked that the city require the Bladesmiths to contribute to their production. It is easy to see that most of the disputes that arose concerned the financial obligations of the various guilds involved. In 1432, several crafts requested that the city dictate their respective financial responsibilities:

In the name of the Lord, Amen. Since recently, in the time of Henry Preston, mayor, upon the advice of the council of the Chamber, the pageant of the Saucemakers in the Corpus Christi Play, in which Judas used to hang himself and burst in the middle, and the pageant of the Tilemakers, in which Pilate has condemned Jesus to death, and the pageant of the Turners, Hayresters, and Bollers, in which Jesus had been bound to the pillar and flogged, and the pageant of the Millers, in which Pilate and other soldiers used to play at dice for the clothing of Jesus and to cast lots for them and to divide them among themselves, were combined together in one pageant, after the other aforesaid pageants were
stopped forever, which pageant indeed will be called the pageant of the Condemnation of Jesus Christ; after this, the craftsmen of the aforesaid crafts used to disagree among themselves about this, the manner of payment to the said pageant (YR, II, 733).

With six guilds responsible for the pageant, it is hardly surprising that problems arose. The entry goes on to record the responsibilities apportioned by the city to the various crafts.

It is clear that the amalgamation of pageants was meant to save money as well as time. Smith noted in her introduction to the plays:

"... as business grew, a new craft would spring up, an old one decay and become too poor to produce its play, a new one must take its share; one craft trenching on the trade of another must share its burdens, sometimes two, or even three plays would be combined into one, sometimes a play would be laid aside and the craft to which it had been assigned must join in producing some other (YP, p. xix).

In 1444, the Armourers complained to the city

"... pat we suffice not to mayntene nor vphalde be charges & costes pat we bere yerely about re bringing furth of our pageant & play vpon corpus christi day with mony other costes olesse pat it may lyke you to provyde some other meen to our succour & supportacion (YR, I, 62).

The crafts, however, appear to have requested changes in their responsibilities for reasons other than financial. In 1431-2, the Goldsmiths, who performed two lavish pageants of the Three Kings, complained that they could no longer afford to produce both plays. They requested that one play be turned over to the Masons, who were anxious to discard their pageant of the story of Fergus:
In the name of the Lord, Amen. It ought not to be passed over, but rather remembered that the Goldsmiths of this city of York in years past have borne heavy burden and excessive expenses for their pageants in the play of Corpus Christi. And now times have changed for them and they have been made poorer in goods than usual, and by ways and means stated above have made frequent suit to mayors and to the council of the Chamber for having aid either as relief of their unsupportable burdens or else that they be relieved of one of their pageants, since, as costs which grow daily on this account explain, they have not been able to sustain the burden of both of their pageants any longer undue hardship. On the other hand, indeed, the Masons of this city have been accustomed to murmur among themselves about their pageant in the Corpus Christi Play in which Fergus was beaten because the subject of this pageant is not contained in the sacred scripture and used to produce more noise and laughter than devotion. And whenever quarrels, disagreements, and fights used to arise among the people from this, they have rarely or never been able to produce their pageant and to play in daylight as the preceding pageants do. Therefore, these Masons have been striving with great need to be relieved from this pageant of theirs and assigned to another which is in harmony with sacred scripture, and which they will be able to produce and play in daylight. And for fulfilling their desires of this kind, both aforesaid parties have importuned and begged in the presence of the mayor and council of the Chamber to have their good consent and gracious will in this matter. Wherefore Thomas Snauden, mayor, the aldermen, and the council of the Chamber of this city, willing and receiving kindly the wishes of the men of the aforesaid crafts, and judging them consonant with probity, decided that the aforesaid Goldsmiths, for the lessening of their heavy burdens, be freed of one of their pageants, ie, that of Herod, and similarly, that the aforesaid Masons be freed and quit of the pageant of Fergus, and that those Masons have for themselves and their craft the aforesaid pageant of Herod which the Goldsmiths had to produce formerly and play at their own expense in the Corpus Christi Play, in the more lavish manner which is seemly for the praise of the city, every time the aforesaid play shall be played in the aforesaid city (YR, II, 732-33).

The Masons' complaint that they "have rarely or never been able to produce their pageant and to play in daylight" reintroduces the question of the length of the Play. The
pageant of "Fergus" is one of the last ones listed in the ordo paginarum, followed by only three others. At midsummer in northern England, the sun would not have set until nearly nine o'clock. The performance of the Play must have lasted very late indeed if the pageant of "Fergus" was generally performed after dark.

The two pageants of the Three Kings produced by the Goldsmiths survive in the York register. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the two plays is that they possess 144 lines in common. Smith suggested that perhaps both were not performed every year (YP, p. 125). Actually, nowhere in the records is there any indication that all the plays in the register were performed every year. It has been demonstrated that the guilds were constantly altering responsibilities for their pageants. It is possible that in some years those guilds complaining about their inability to produce their pageants were excused from performance. New pageants were often added, either from combinations of existing ones, or, as in 1477, by decree--"(it was ordered) that the pageant of the Purification of the blessed Virgin Mary shall play henceforth yearly on the feast of Corpus Christi just as the other pageants (do)" (YR, II, 777-78). Other pageants were discarded, particularly after the Reformation. In 1548, the Marian plays were suppressed: "Also it is forther agreyd by the sayd presens that Corpuscristy play shalbe playd this yere Certen pagyauntes excepte / That is
to say / the deynge of our Lady / assumption of our Lady / and Coronacion of our Lady" (YR, I, 291-92). Although re-
vived during the reign of Queen Mary, these plays were again
suppressed in 1561, and never performed after that year.
These factors alone account for the variations between the
register, the *ordo paginarum*, and the c. 1420 list of page-
ents. It seems far more likely that the surviving register
of plays is an official list of all the plays available for
production rather than a prompt-copy of the plays performed
every year. That the manuscript of the plays was an official
register compiled by the city is borne out by a 1567 record:

Aggreed that the Pageantes of Corpus christi suche as
be not allready Registred shalbe with all conventen
spede be fayre wrytten by Iohn Clerke in the [bo] old
Registre yerof viz. of Vyntenors the Archetricline / of
thyron mongars / Marie Magdalene washyng the Lordes
feete &c. of the Tylars the lattr part of their pageant /
Of the Labrors the Purificacion of our lady & [of] the
Cappers to be examined with the Register & reformed
(YR, I, 351).

The order was only partially carried out. The play of the
"Purification of Mary" was inserted in the register as
Play 41, although properly it should be Play 18. The other
plays mentioned in the entry do not survive.

A processional performance of fewer than forty-eight
plays would have been somewhat shorter than Nelson's estima-
tion, although it is impossible to determine precisely how
long it would have lasted. A recent study by Rogerson
offers convincing evidence that the entire cycle of plays
could have been performed in less time than Nelson proposes.
Her calculations will be considered later in this chapter. At present, it is important to note that the surviving cycle of forty-eight plays quite probably was never performed in its entirety in any given year.

Processional performance was undeniably a complicated matter, and the guilds appointed certain members as pageant masters to oversee productions. Pageant masters were chosen yearly, and their number "varied with the size and affluence of the craft: for example, the Mercers elected four each year while the Bakers elected only two" (YR, I, xiv). Pageant masters were evidently chosen as soon after Corpus Christi as possible in order to take over their responsibilities for the coming year, as is demonstrated by this 1424 ordinance of the Curriers' guild:

Item, on the seventh day of February in the second year of the reign of King Henry the sixth, it was agreed by all the masters of the aforesaid craft that on the next Sunday after the feast of the Purification of blessed Mary, they would choose their new searchers for the coming year, and that on the next Sunday after the feast of Corpus Christi, they would choose their pageant masters, and that their former pageant masters then would render up an account of their tenure in the past year and will give up all their properties belonging to the pageant and play into the care and hands of the searchers under penalty of 6s 8d (YR, II, 725).

Pageant masters collected the "pageant silver" from craft members, and annually reported to the city their income and expenses regarding the pageants. They also managed the overall production of their craft's pageant. A 1475 ordinance of the Armourers' guild indicates that the pageant masters
were responsible for getting the pageant underway and seeing that its performance ran smoothly:

Item that alle the maisters of the same Crafte frome nowefurth yerely on Corpus Christi day in the mornyng be redy in their owen propre personne euery one of thayme with Ane honest wapyn to awayte apon their pagende maisters and pagende at pe playnge ande settyngefurth of their saide pagende at pe firste place where theyshall begyns Ande so toawyte apon pe same their pagende thurgh pe Cite to pe play be plaide as of hat same pagende And who [...] be of the saide maisters as hereafter makyth defalt in pis partie shall forfait vj d to be paide in fourme before written withoute he haue A reasonable excuse &c (YR, I, 104-05).

A similar ordinance of the Spurriers and Lorimers, enacted in 1494, requires the pageant masters to accompany their pageant throughout its performance:

Item it is ordeyned & Ennacted yat every maister of the said Crafte on corpus christi day yerly shall attend vpon yer paiaunt frome ye mateir of play be begune At ye first place vnto such tyme as ye said play be played & finished throug the toun At ye last playse & who soo is Absent at ony place except he be seik or haue oyer excuse Reasonable shall forfeit & pay in fourme toforseid ij s &c (YR, I, 176).

These ordinances, as well as outlining the duties of the pageant masters, offer still more proof that the plays were performed processionally. Pageant masters were required to accompany their pageant from "ye first place vnto such tyme as ye said play be played & finished throug the toun At ye last playse." It is evident from other records that "places" refers to the various stations, and pageant masters were forbidden to be "Absent at ony place." Clearly, the pageant masters acted as producers who made sure that the performances were of a quality befitting both the guild and the
city of York, as well as ensuring that the pageant made its way along the performance route without complications.

Numerous minor entries in the York records also testify to a processional performance. Actors are paid by the Mercers' guild for their performance "thorow ye tone" (YR, I, 96), and countless lists of guild expenditures include expenses for meals for the players. A 1461 list of the Mercers' "costes mad a bowitt ye pagant" includes the costs for "a dener to ye players," "a brekfast to ye [s] players," "a sopper to ye playeres & ye mynstelles att euyn," and "drynke to ye players" (YR, I, 91-92). Apparently the Play was lengthy if the players required so much refreshment. Records indicate that the guilds found it necessary to keep the pageant wagons in a constant state of repair in order to guarantee their dependability on Corpus Christi day. Guild accounts mention repair or replacement of wheels, as well as expenses for "sope to the whelys" (YR, I, 97), presumably to grease the axles. Records also refer to the hiring of individuals to bring the wagons to the place of assembly on Corpus Christi morning, and later to return them to the pageant houses at Toft Green, where they were stored. (The actors themselves apparently drew the wagons from station to station.) Annual lists record rents paid for storing the pageant wagons; in fact, the earliest reference to the Corpus Christi Play is a 1376 list of rents for three pageant wagons (YR, II, 689).
The texts of the plays themselves offer some evidence of processional performance. Dramatic action and stage directions seem to indicate a small playing area, crowded performance sites, and close contact with the audience. "The Temptation of Jesus" is one of many plays that open with some reference to a crowd. Satan bustles his way through a crowd, directly addressing what must surely have been members of the audience rather than fellow actors:

Make rome be-lyve, and late me gang,
Who makis here all pis þrang?
High you hense! High myght you hang
right with a roppe.
I drede me þat I dwell to lang
to do a jape.
(YP, 22, 1-4)

Of still more interest are the eleven plays of the Passion sequence, most of which are attributed to the author known as the York Realist. Eight of these plays open with a figure of authority, generally Pontius Pilate, addressing a crowd and calling for peace and order. In Play 29, Caiaphas demands that the crowd in his hall be silent:

Pees, bewshers, I bid no jangelyng 3e make,
And sese some of youre sawes, & se what I saye,
And trewe tente vnto me pis tyme þat 3e take,
For I am a lorde lerned lelly in youre lay.
(YP, 29, 1-4)

At the close of "The Travellers to Emmaus Meet Jesus," the disciples rejoice at having seen the risen Lord, concluding, however, "Here may we notte melle [of] more at this tyde, /
For prosesse of plaies þat precis in plight" (YP, 40, 193-94). Performance time, it seems, was always a problem.
After the appearance of Nelson's time scheme for the York plays, Rogerson submitted the cycle to a similar analysis. As Nelson did, she based her calculations on the entire cycle of forty-eight plays performed at twelve stations, twelve being the number most commonly used at York. She stressed the approximation of her results, noting the many factors that cannot be considered, such as stage action, music, and the varying number of both pageants and stations.15

Rogerson accepted Nelson's calculated performance rate of one thousand lines per hour. However, her calculations differ from Nelson's in her analysis of the topography of the pageant route. Nelson calculated that the pageants spent the equivalent of one hundred lines, or six minutes, travelling between stations. Using the 1399 list of stations, Rogerson timed the route on foot, taking into account the changes in the route that have taken place since the fourteenth century. She noted that the stations are not equal distances apart, and that none are as far apart as Nelson supposed. Most are only two to three minutes apart, and none are more than five.16 Rogerson also chose to ignore entirely Nelson's calculations for setting up the pageants at each station, assuming that each pageant could begin its performance as soon as the station was clear. As she observes, "many pageants opened with a soliloquy and so the speaker could walk into the station and begin playing while the wagon drew up."17 As has been noted, many plays
also open with a bid for silence. The figure of Satan pushing his way through the crowd at the beginning of Play 22 would have provided the audience with an excellent distraction while the pageant wagon was pulled into the station.

Assuming that the Play began its performance at 4:30 a.m. at Holy Trinity Priory, Rogerson calculates that the last pageant would finish its performance at the last station at 12:29 a.m. the following morning. This timespan, she feels, is in accordance with contemporary accounts. As has already been observed, the Masons complained that it was nearly impossible to perform the pageant of "Fergus" in daylight, and it must have been necessary to perform some of the other plays after dark.

Many of the problems associated with processional staging are resolved by Rogerson's calculations. For example, although the Play's performance time was lengthy, both audiences and actors had opportunities between performances to rest and refresh themselves. Rogerson also proposes that her calculations offer a new interpretation of the 1476 ordinance stipulating that the actors "plaie buttwise." As noted, this ruling is generally thought to forbid doubling in individual pageants, although Kahrl has offered the possibility that the entire Play was to be performed no more than twice. Rogerson believes that it forbids actors to perform in more than two plays. Her calculations show that actors in the earliest pageants would have finished in time...
to perform in one and sometimes two of the later pageants, and might have wished to, in order to earn extra income. Rogerson observes:

There are clearly opportunities for playing more than two parts in the reconstructed performance. The instruction of 1476 can therefore be seen as a necessary one. If the progress of the pageants was delayed for any reason, the fine timing needed for playing three parts could have been upset and the performance plunged into confusion.

Rogerson's reconstructed performance and its "breakneck pace" have been discounted by Stevens and others. It is true that her calculations depend on a performance free of errors and so precisely timed as to be practically impossible. However, Rogerson never proposes that the entire surviving cycle of plays was performed exactly in this manner at any time. It is her purpose to demonstrate, using calculations based on Nelson's, that the Play could have been performed processionally in a single day. Common sense and logic may argue for a stationary performance, but the records dictate otherwise.

Having established that the mode of performance of the Corpus Christi Play at York was undoubtedly processional, I shall discuss the practical aspects and possibilities of processional production in Chapter IV and examine the staging of several individual plays, as well as the appearance of the pageant wagons.
NOTES


2 Twycross, p. 10.

3 Twycross, pp. 21-22.

4 Twycross, p. 21.

5 Twycross, p. 17.

6 Twycross, p. 18.

7 Twycross, p. 18.

8 Twycross, pp. 17-18.


10 Margaret Dorrell, "Two Studies of the York Corpus Christi Play," Leeds Studies in English, 6 (1972), 94.

11 Dorrell, 80.

12 This play, which has not survived, was apparently based on an apocryphal legend of the death of Mary. As her body was borne to burial, it was attacked by a Jew named Fergus, who suffered a paralyzed arm for his blasphemy (YP, p. xlix, n. 3).


14 Dorrell, 96.

15 Dorrell, 96-97.

16 Dorrell, 98.

17 Dorrell, 98-99.
18 Dorrell, 98-99.
19 Dorrell, 100-01.
20 Dorrell, 101.
CHAPTER IV

PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF PAGEANT STAGING

The critical debate regarding processional versus fixed staging of the cycle plays in England has tended to obscure the texts of the plays themselves. With few exceptions, most notably Kahrl's Traditions of Medieval English Drama, critical studies have ignored the possibilities offered by pageant wagon staging. Quite probably, this is the case because no attempt has been made to study its origins. It has yet to be satisfactorily determined why processional drama developed in some locations and not in others.

Processional staging has been regarded as a phenomenon peculiar to the feast of Corpus Christi, and possibly an outgrowth of the traditional procession. E. K. Chambers suggested that processional staging "probably arose from an attempt . . . to adapt the already existing miracle-plays to the distinctive feature of the festival of Corpus Christi." Cycle drama, however, was not everywhere associated with the feast of Corpus Christi. Moreover, the two other great religious plays of York, the Creed Play and the Pater Noster Play, were in no way related to Corpus Christi, yet apparently also were performed processationally. As Glynne Wickham has pointed out, if processional staging were somehow
related to the Corpus Christi procession, then surely the form would have been widespread over England rather than confined to a few locations. Processional staging was chosen because it offered advantages appropriate to the location. One important advantage certainly was the opportunity to reach a greater audience. Rather than mass congregation in a single playing area, smaller audiences saw the Play from a number of optional viewing stations. It was important that the Play reach as many people as possible, partially because of the festivities associated with it, but also because of its religious nature. As the York records constantly reiterate, the purpose of the Play was to instruct and to instill devotion in its audience.

Until recently, staging of medieval drama was regarded as crude and haphazard. It now seems clear that medieval dramatists knew far more about theatrics than has been generally assumed. Discussion of the staging of individual plays is probably best demonstrated by a clearer knowledge of the pageant stages. Pageant wagons varied, of course, according to the needs of particular plays and the wealth of the guilds performing them. However, some generalizations can be made about the probable size and appearance of the wagons, as well as their performing area. Examinations of the various theories of the appearance of the wagons, as well as some contemporary accounts, should allow for a tentative statement of the general appearance of the wagons.
In order to discuss the staging of the pageants, a few terms must be clarified. It should again be stressed that the word "pageant" has two meanings. In its earliest usage, it referred to the movable stages on which the plays were performed. Later, the term was also applied to the plays themselves. When the term is encountered in records, its meaning is sometimes clear from the context, but this is not always so. In this study, "pageant" most generally refers to one of the individual episodes of the Play. Two other terms must also be used in the general discussion of the plays' staging. Locus may be defined as "a particular, localized part of the mise en scène." Platea refers to the street area immediately in front of the stage.

There are no surviving contemporary descriptions of the Play's performance at York. A near-contemporary account of the Chester cycle plays survives in the Brevaryes, early seventeenth-century histories of Chester compiled by David Rogers, using the notes of his father, Archdeacon Robert Rogers. It has been fairly well established that comparative studies of medieval staging are fruitless, as cycle drama was staged differently wherever it was performed, and I do not wish to imply that the staging of the plays at York was comparable to the staging of plays at Chester. However, the controversy surrounding the Rogers account of the plays at Chester is worth examining because its descriptions have so frequently been applied to the staging of plays elsewhere.
in England. The descriptions of pageant wagons that will be discussed later in this chapter frequently rely on the Rogers account, and so it seems necessary to summarize briefly the description, and to determine its accuracy.

The Rogers account, as usually cited, reads as follows:

these pagiantes or carige was a highe place made like a howse with 2 rowmes being open on the tope. the lower rowme theie. apparrelled and dressed them selues. and the higher rowme[s] theie played. and thei stoode vpon vj wheeles. and when the[y] had donne with one cariage in one place theie wheled the same from one streeete to another. firste from the Abbaye gate. to the pentise. then to the watergate streeete. then to the bridge streeete. through the lanes & so to the estegate streeete. And thus the[y] came from one streeete to another kepinge a directe order in euerye streeete for before thei firste Carige was gone from one place the seconde came. and so before the seconde was gone the thirde came. and so tell the laste was donne all in order withoute anye stayeinge in anye place. for worde beinge broughte howe euerye place was neere doone the[y] came and made noe place to tarye tell the laste was played.5

Early scholars, such as Chambers, accepted this as an accurate description of processional staging. However, the account was subsequently discounted for a number of reasons. Hardin Craig found that "manifestly it is wrong in many matters, or at best is applicable to pageants at Chester only, and is also too vague to be of much value."6 Craig particularly disputed the description of the pageant wagon, noting that it "does not provide a workable stage for any known play and is not even generally correct."7 Most of the details in the description are contrary to what is known about the plays. The pageants could not have been roofless, or
"open on the tope," because the roofs were necessary to disguise the windlasses used for the actors' ascents and descents. There was no need for an extra room where the actors "apparrelled and dressed them selues," because there were probably no costume changes. A lengthy analysis by Nelson concluded that the wagons could not have "stoode vpon vj wheeles," as six wheels would have required a complicated undercarriage that would have been difficult to maneuver. Moreover, the account is late, and although the plays were still being performed in Archdeacon Rogers' lifetime, he was strongly prejudiced against them. Therefore, the Rogers description has come to be considered a biased and inaccurate account.

However, a recent analysis of the Brevaryes by Lawrence M. Clopper argues that the description of the plays may be somewhat more reliable than is presently thought. Primarily, Clopper points out that there are four versions of the Brevary, composed between 1609 and 1623. The above description, which is the one most commonly quoted, is from the earliest and most inaccurate version. David Rogers continued to research his history, and revised and corrected his material over a period of several years. His statement, for instance, that the wagons had "vj wheeles" was probably a mistranscription of the Roman numeral IV, and was corrected in subsequent versions of the Brevary. The description obviously could not fit all pageants, because stage
requirements were different for the various plays. But without clearer proof of what the pageants actually looked like, it is impossible to entirely dismiss the account as inaccurate. Clopper proposes a comparison of the details of the Rogers account with the texts of the individual plays to determine the feasibility of such a stage, concluding that "arguments based on the impracticability or awkwardness of such a stage require documentary support before we can confidently reject the Rogers' plan."11

Using Rogers as a point of departure, a number of conjectures have been offered as to the appearance of the pageant wagons. Wickham, who offers an excellent discussion of the symbolic use of stage properties to establish loci, fails in his attempt to reconstruct a practical pageant stage. Supposing that a pageant stage of fifteen feet by twenty feet would be too small to accommodate properties and stage action for most plays, he proposes that an additional scaffold of equal size was pulled alongside the stage, thus creating a stage twenty feet wide and thirty feet deep. The pageant cart itself was roofed to hide mechanisms, and had a tiring house in the rear portion. It held the various properties, while the scaffold was empty.12

Wickham's proposal must be rejected both on practical terms and on the basis of existing evidence. It is possible that a few of the guilds at York employed more than one stage for their plays, but nowhere were scaffolds used in
the manner that Wickham suggests. At York, their use would have been impossible. The streets were far too narrow to accommodate such stages. Micklegate ("Great Street") was most likely the widest street in the city, and yet was only thirty-five feet wide. Another street of the pageant route, Petergate, was only twenty-five feet wide. The records state that the stations were to be before the houses of the highest bidders and do not stipulate that they were to be in the widest streets. Therefore, the wagons were certainly small enough to fit the streets of the pageant route, even with scaffolds erected for the audiences.

Wickham's suggestion of the need for more acting space seems unwarranted considering the nature of the plays, but, assuming that it were necessary, his means of providing it are impractical. A stage with a depth of thirty feet would have provided the audience with a poor perspective. As M. James Young has suggested, Wickham would have done better to propose placing the scaffold at the rear of the wagon, thus improving sight lines as well as providing more acting space. However, careful examination of the plays indicates that there was no need for such a large acting area. Most plays call for only one or two loci, and it is clear from guild accounts that properties were kept to a minimum.

An analysis of the texts of the plays as well as consideration of practical problems forced Young to reject both the Rogers description and Wickham's proposed stage. In
order to be both practical and maneuverable, Young suggested, the wagon stages were no larger than ten feet by twenty feet. Practical considerations would have necessitated stages of this size, and the surviving plays were obviously written to be performed in small areas. Young suggests that some of the stages were roofed in order to conceal windlasses and other devices, and these stages were not more than ten to twelve feet in height. Like Wickham, Young suggested that props were kept simple and used symbolically. A slight elevation, for instance, of perhaps only a step or two, might signify a hill or mountaintop. The dialogue of the plays themselves would establish the loci. Young also proposed that "the York plays present several situations which suggest the use of curtains to close off loci." Plays requiring that different loci appear side by side while action takes place in only one of them would prove distracting to the audience, according to Young. Concealing one of the loci with curtains would enable the audience to focus more easily on the other. This device, however, was probably not necessary. As stage action shifts from one locus to another, an audience, unless somehow distracted, will ignore the former scene. This fact is as true of modern stages as it was of medieval ones. As Kahrl points out, it is no agreed-upon convention, shared by audience and actors alike, that accomplishes this, but a fact of such stages that if an actor freezes well away from the action, he has in fact disappeared as effectively as if he had walked through a door.
The curtains listed in guild inventories were most likely used as backdrops for the stages or perhaps to hide the wagon wheels, much like modern-day parade floats.

Although Young rejected Wickham's proposed scaffold and stage, he did observe that two pageant wagons might be occasionally desirable, such as in the case of the Mercers' pageant of "The Last Judgment," a particularly difficult play to stage. It has a cast of seventeen and requires four loci, and thus would be nearly impossible to stage on Young's proposed pageant wagon. However, as he points out, there is some indication that the Mercers used two pageant stages. A 1464 list of Mercers' Pageant Accounts records expenses "for nayls to both pagyants," "for bryngyng forth of the pagyantes into the strette," and "for havyng of both pagyantes agayn to the pagyant hows" (YR, I, 97). Young assumes that these two pageants were of the same size, and that placed one behind the other, they provided sufficient room to stage this elaborate play.

In 1971, a document was discovered that has shed some interesting light on Young's speculations, and has offered some indications of how the Mercers' pageant was produced. The document is an indenture drawn up by the Mercers in 1433. Listing the properties of the Mercers' pageant, it is the clearest contemporary description of a pageant wagon:

This endenture made in þe feste of Corpus christi In þe 3ere of oure lorde god ml. CCCC xxxiiij betwene Richard Louth Maister of þe Cumpany of Mersers of þe
Cite of 3orke & Nicholas Vseflete & William 3arom of 3e saide Cumpny on 3e to syde And William Bedale William Holbek Henry Market & Thomas Curtays 3an Pagent Maisters on 3e tother syde beris Witnes 3at 3e saide Maister & constables has deliuerde to 3e saide Pagent Maisters all pir parcelles vnderwretyn langing to paire pagent safely to kepe & to gouerne for paire tyme And thos same parcelles to deliuer forthe agayne in resonable tyme to 3e neste Pagent Maisters 3at sall occupy in 3e neste 3ere after And so all Pagent Maisters to deliuer forth be pis endenture to other Pagent Maisters 3at sall occupy for 3e 3ere While 3e Pagent gere lastes ffrrst a Pagent With iii ij Wheles helle mouthe iii j garmentes for iii j deuels vj deuelles faces in iii j Vesernes Array for iii j euell saules 3at is to say iii j Sirkes iii j paire hoses iii j vesenes & iii j Cheuelers Array for iii j gode saules 3at ys to say iii j Sirkes iii j paire hoses iii j vesernes & iii j Cheuelers iii j paire Aungell Wynges with Iren in 3e endes iii j trumpees of White plate & iii j redes iii j Aubes for iii j Appostels iii j diademes with iii j vesernes for iii j Appostels iii j diademes with iii iii j Cheuelers of 3alow for iii j Apostels A cloud & iii j peces of Rainbow of tymber Array for god 3at ys to say a Sirke Wounded a diadem With a veserne giltid A grete coster of rede damaske payntid for the bakke syde of 3e pagent iii j other lesse costers for iii j sydes of 3e Pagent iii j other costers of lewent brede for 3e sides of 3e Pagent A litel coster iii j squared to hang at 3e bakke of god iii j Irens to bere vppe heuen iii j finale cotereilles & 3e Iren pynne A brandreth of Iren 3at god sall sitte vppon when he sall sty vppe to heuen With iii j rapes at iii j corners A heuen of Iren With a naffe of tre iii j peces of rede cloudes & sternes of gold langing to heuen iii j peces of blu cloudes payntid on bothe sydes iii j peces of rede cloudes With sunne bemes of golde & sternes for 3e hiest of heuen With a lang small border of the same Wurke iii j grete Aungels halding 3e passion of god Ane of 3ame has a fane of laton & a crosse of Iren in his hede giltid iii j smaller Aungels giltid holding 3e passion ix smaler Aungels payntid rede to renne aboute in 3e heuen A lang small corde to gerre 3e Aungels renne aboute iii j shorte rolls of tre to putte forthe 3e pagent (YR, I, 55-56).

Johnston and Rogerson were the first to attempt a detailed study of the 1433 indenture,20 and I shall summarize here some of their conclusions as to the appearance of the Mercers' pageant wagon. It should be pointed out that the Mercers
were one of the wealthier guilds in medieval York, and many members were prominent citizens. It seems clear, both from this document and from the status of the guild, that their pageant was one of the most elaborate in the Play. Although theirs should not be regarded as a typical one, some of the details of the indenture make it possible to offer speculations of the general characteristics of the pageant wagons used at York.

The basic structure of the wagon was simple: "a Pagent With iiiij Wheles." Judging from the description, the other properties seem to have been dismantled after the final performance on Corpus Christi day, and reassembled the following year. Thus the need for the precise inventory. Four iron poles ("iiiij Irens to bere vppe heuen"), probably at the four corners of the platform, supported the roof, which represented heaven ("A heuen of Iren With a naffe of tre").

The stage was surrounded on three sides by curtains: "A grete coster of rede damaske payntid for the bakke syde of pe pagent ij other lesse costers of ij sydes of pe Pagent." God ascended into heaven by means of a swing: "A brandreth of Iren bat god sall sitte vppon when he sall sty vppe to heuen With iiiij rapes at iiiij corners." Johnston and Rogerson propose that the "Iren pynne" may have been a ring-bolt through which a rope was pulled to elevate the swing. The decorative details of the pageant were lavish--"A cloud & ij peces of Rainbow of tymber," as well as "ij peces of
rede cloudes & sternes of gold langing to heuen ij peces of
blu cloudes payntid on bothe sydes iiij peces of rede cloudes
With sunne bemes of golde & sternes for þe hiest of heuen."

The pageant also had some twenty artificial angels.
Nine of these angels appear to have been small puppets hanging from the roof--"ix smaler Aungels payntid rede to renne aboute in þe heuen"--and manipulated by "A lang small corde to gerre þe Aungels renne aboute." The larger angels bear various symbols of the passion: "vij grete Aungels halding þe passion of god Ane of þame has a fane of laton & a crosse of Iren in his hede giltid iiij smaller Aungels gilted holding þe passion." Jesus, listed as Deus in the dramatis personae of the text, wears a garment bearing the marks of the passion ("a Sirke Wounded"). Before the final judgment, he reveals his wounds to his audience:

Here may þe see my woundes wide,
þe whilke I tholed for youre mysdede,
Thurgh harte and heed, foote, hande, and hide,
Nought for my gilte, butt for youre nede.
Beholdis both body, bak, and side,
How dere I bought youre brotherhede.
þes bittir peynes I wolde abide
To bye you blisse, þus wolde I bleede.

YP, 48, 245-52

It would seem likely that he pointed to the various angels as he described his passion, as he designates the different symbols:

Mi body was scourged with-outen skil,
As theffe full thraly was [I] thrette,
On crosse þei hanged me, on a hill,
Blody and bloo, as I was bette.
With croune of thorne throsten full ill,
pis spere vnto my side was sette,
Myne harte bloode spared noght pei for to spill,
Manne for thy loue wolde I not lette.  

(YP, 48, 253-60)

The "helle mouthe" of the 1433 indenture probably was not attached to the wagon itself, but placed in the street. The judgment scene presumably took place in the platea, so that "once judgment was passed, the good souls could have mounted the wagon, clearly making the distinction between the saved and the damned left on the street to be dragged into hell mouth." The second pageant noted by Young in the 1464 list of expenses is first mentioned in a 1463 list of accounts: "I now pagand yat was mayd for ye sallys to ryse owtof" (YR, I, 95). It apparently was not, as he supposed, another full-size pageant wagon. Because there is no mention of wheels for either the hell mouth or the "now pagand," both probably were properties small enough to be carried on the wagon and placed in the street at each station. The "now pagand," however, was large enough to hold the four actors playing two good souls and two bad souls. There is not enough evidence from the account to determine its actual appearance, although Johnston and Rogerson suggest that it might have been made to look like a coffin.

In 1501, the Mercers admitted to their guild a carver named Thomas Drawswerd under the condition that he "mak the pagiant of the dome belonging to the merchauntes [of] newe substancialie in every thing pervnto belonging" (YR, I, 189).
A 1526 inventory lists the properties of the new wagon, and although the list is not as precise as the 1433 indenture, it provides enough information to indicate that the two pageants were very unlike one another:

One important change from the fifteenth-century wagon is that there is no mention of curtains, hanging clouds or borders. This could be because Drawswerd, as a carver, provided a solid wooden structure with the details of heaven carved into or painted on the fabric. The primitive machinery used for Christ's ascension to heaven was replaced by a windlass. This may have resulted in another change in the appearance of the wagon. In order to house the windlass, the flat roof of the fifteenth-century wagon was probably replaced by a gabled one.24

It also seems apparent from the 1526 account list that both the hell mouth and the property that the souls emerged from had been placed upon small carts. These wheeled properties obviously would have been easier to transport. This sixteenth-century pageant cannot be as easily depicted as its predecessor, but it certainly was equally lavish, if not more so.

It must again be stressed that the Mercers' pageant probably was not a typical one, primarily because of the wealth and prestige of the guild. As producers of the final pageant of the Play, it is also to be expected that the Mercers would have wished to present an appropriate finale to the day's festivities. However, it is not unlikely that the other guilds constructed their pageant wagons in a similar manner, depending upon their wealth and the requirements of their particular play. It is by now almost a cliché to
mention that guilds often produced plays appropriate to their occupations (the York Bakers, for instance, produced "The Last Supper"), but such arrangements enabled the guilds to provide the properties that most enhanced their pageants, as well as contributed to their realism. While details varied, it seems probable that the basic structure of most pageant wagons was not unlike the fifteenth-century pageant of the Mercers.

The 1433 indenture unfortunately provides no dimensions for the wagon, but it does yield other previously unknown information. Most interesting is the fact that the pageant was apparently enclosed on three sides. Pageant stages have been traditionally depicted as open on all sides, enabling the surrounding audience in the streets to view the plays from any position. Discussions of the pageant wagons have generally assumed that medieval audiences viewed performances that were somewhat comparable to theater-in-the-round. Kahrl went so far as to suggest that the pageants, upon reaching the stations, were turned at right angles to the buildings, in order to accommodate greater audiences.\textsuperscript{25} Clifford Davidson and Nona Mason entirely rejected Johnston and Rogerson's reconstruction of the Mercers' pageant wagon, arguing that "only persons on one side of the street would be able to view it."\textsuperscript{26}

This, quite likely, was the case. In her study of the pageant stations at York, Meg Twycross noted that it is, of
course, impossible to locate every station used over a two-
hundred-year period, yet many can be positively identified. Those stations that have been located are all on the left-
hand side of the pageant route. While Twycross' findings cannot point to definite conclusions, they offer some possi-
bilities for the reconstruction of the pageant stages:

The left-hand-side theory has interesting implica-
tions for staging. The accounts of the Mercers' pag-
eant wagon suggest that it had not only a backcloth, but was, after the remodelling by Drawswerd, enclosed on three sides, much like a proscenium stage. If audi-
ence scaffolds were on both sides of the route, to keep turning a heavy cart round so as to face them would be extremely awkward. If they are all on the same side of the road, this does not arise. The cart can, moreover, hug the right-hand kerb (or gutter, in many cases) and give the audience maximum room to dispose themselves, standing or sitting. Davidson and Mason offer a different interpretation of the details of the 1433 indenture, noting that "'the bakke syde' ... should indicate the rear of the wagon. Having the painted cloth on the rear of the wagon also would give the advantage of providing a thrust stage, rather than the less satisfactory shallow stage." However, the stage proposed by Johnston and Rogerson, much like that of an auditorium, would have provided the desired sight lines for its audience. This sort of stage does not compare badly with modern ones.

Most of the plays of the cycle are well suited to the pageant stages. Generally speaking, they are short, with limited action, small casts, and only one or two loci. Not all the plays with these characteristics may be considered
good theater, but many of the best plays of the cycle are those that were written within these staging limitations. In these plays, as in any good play, action develops quickly, characters are effectively realized, and the situations and values presented are recognizable to their audiences. A few of these plays are "The Creation, and the Fall of Lucifer," "Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac," "The Journey to Bethlehem; the Birth of Jesus," and "Crucifixio Christi." These plays are characterized by an economy and directness of style suited to their staging.

Plays with several loci seldom translate well to the pageant stage. It is difficult to imagine the staging of Play 11, "The Departure of the Israelites from Egypt," which requires four loci and some rather difficult stage action. Two loci, Pharaoh's court and Goshen, were clearly presented side by side, and Moses travelled back and forth between the two. However, the burning bush on Mount Sinai was also represented, and the platea presumably was somehow used when the Egyptians in their chariots drowned in the Red Sea, although there are no records of the sort of properties that might have been employed in these scenes. This sort of play, with several diverse loci and complicated action obviously was not suited for performance on a small, localized stage. Several plays of the Passion sequence, particularly "The Agony and the Betrayal," also come across as poorly constructed for the pageant stages.
However, some of the plays with large casts and multiple loci might have been successfully presented on the pageant stages, although it is clear that careful planning would have been required. Young felt that the Mercers' pageant of "The Judgment Day" was among the most difficult of the cycle to stage, but the details of the 1433 indenture provide a fairly clear reconstruction of the play's production. "The Entry into Jerusalem" also provides a number of staging problems, particularly as it requires that as many as thirty actors be on the stage at one time. Young suggests that in this case the platea was used. He observes that "much of the action of the play occurs in the street as Christ rides by on the ass; so it seems reasonable to assume that Christ would be actually on the street and not on the wagon." Use of the platea would have resolved the spatial problems of other pageants as well. The plays that required a hell mouth, "The Creation, and the Fall of Lucifer," "The Harrowing of Hell," and "The Judgment Day," probably placed that property in the street. Both "The Creation, and the Fall of Lucifer" and "The Harrowing of Hell" require that Satan fall into the pit of hell; thus, it seems logical that he would have fallen from the pageant stage into the street. The use of the hell mouth in "The Judgment Day" has already been described. However, performance in the platea was probably confined to a few difficult plays. Most of the plays seem to have been intended for performance on the
small pageant stage.

Why medieval producers chose to mount these stages on wheels and perform about the city must still be determined. Perhaps such staging was an outgrowth or imitation of the Corpus Christi processions, but considering what is now known about the Play, this association cannot be simply assumed. Certainly this form of staging could have reached a larger audience, although it is not known how large the audience actually was. One factor that has been almost entirely overlooked is the possibility that processional staging may simply have been a convenient form of production for the York guilds. Many different groups were responsible for many different episodes, and processional staging may have provided a simpler, decentralized organization for the Play.31 Rather than one massive, complicated production, the guilds produced a series of short, related episodes. The guilds were responsible for producing and maintaining their individual pageants according to appropriate standards, while the civic ordinances maintained control and cohesion over the entire Play. This is, of course, only speculation. However, processional staging at York, as elsewhere, cannot be analyzed fully until its origins have been determined.
NOTES


7 Craig, p. 124.


9 Clopper, 63.

10 Clopper, 79.

11 Clopper, 81.

12 Wickham, 170-73.

13 Young, 12.

14 Young, 13.

15 Young, 16.

16 Young, 17.

17 Young, 18.

19 Young, 15.


25 Kahrl, p. 137, n. 15.


28 Twycross, p. 20.

29 Davidson and Mason, 177, n. 9.

30 Young, 14.

31 Wickham, 168.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Traditionally, processional staging of cycle drama has been most closely associated with York. It is probably for this reason that Alan H. Nelson chose that particular site for his time analysis refuting the possibility of processional staging, thus initiating the present controversy over the mode of performance at York. Nelson's calculations indicated the impossibility of processionally performing the entire cycle in a single day, and he argued in favor of a single stationary performance of the plays. However, Margaret Dorrell Rogerson's examination of contemporary accounts, as well as a time analysis similar to Nelson's, established that the Corpus Christi Play was performed processionally during the course of a single day. My own examination of the evidence concurs with Rogerson's findings, and it is clear that the Play was performed processionally throughout its history.

In recent years, both the origins and the staging of the York Corpus Christi Play have been questioned. Martin Stevens, among others, has suggested that the plays originated as *tableaux vivants* in the Corpus Christi procession, and that the cycle did not begin to evolve until after 1426,
the date of Friar Melton's sermon exhorting the people to hold the procession and the Play on different days. However, Alexandra F. Johnston has established that this separation did not take place until after 1468. It is also evident that, even when both took place on the same day, the Play and the procession were always separate functions following different routes. Moreover, the civic procession was only one of at least three ecclesiastical processions in York on Corpus Christi day. It appears that the procession and the Play were never directly related in either their organization or development.

The traditional theory of processional staging has been questioned on the premise that it was inefficient and time-consuming. The most logical alternative to processional staging is Stevens' suggestion of a single performance of the Play on the Pavement. This theory has been widely accepted, in spite of the fact that it is unsubstantiated by the York records. Contemporary accounts are frequently ambiguous; however, they tend to verify that the plays at York were indeed performed processionally, although not precisely according to the generally accepted theory. It must be acknowledged that the cycle of plays went through a number of changes during its history, as demonstrated by the variations found in the two lists of Roger Burton, the surviving register, and the various civic records. While the nature of the Play remained essentially unchanged, the various episodes,
as well as the overall length, apparently went through continual revisions. It is possible that not all of the plays of the cycle were performed each year, although, until more evidence is available, it must be assumed that they were. It is clear, however, from all accounts, that the Play's performance was quite lengthy, lasting well beyond nightfall.

Measures were taken to limit the duration of the Play and to ensure a smooth performance. Playing stations were designated by the city according to the amount of money bid for them, and banners marked each official station. The pageants were required to play at these places and nowhere else. The craft guilds, besides requiring "pageant silver" from each member to support and sustain their pageants, appointed individuals as pageant masters, who were responsible for getting their pageants underway and accompanying them for the entire route, maintaining order and seeing to it that the performance befitted the standards of the guild and the city.

These individual pageants, often regarded as crude and amateurish, actually seem to have been produced with some degree of sophistication and care. The 1433 indenture describing the Mercers' pageant wagon indicates that theirs was a lavish and elaborate pageant, appropriate to the guild's status, and a suitable finale to the Corpus Christi Play. The pageant stages were probably small, as the streets
of the route were narrow, and they apparently were enclosed on three sides, creating sight lines much like that of an indoor stage. It is possible that the pageant station scaffolds were all located on the left-hand side of the route to better enable the audience to view the stages. Most of the surviving plays are suited to production on such small, confined stages, although it is likely that those plays with more complicated stage action made occasional use of the platea.

Although I have established that processional staging was the characteristic type of performance at York, there remain unresolved problems. One of the most difficult to consider is the length of the performance. None of the recent estimates of the Play's length is completely satisfactory. Nelson's proposal of a thirty-eight-hour performance must be rejected as extreme, as all accounts state clearly that the Play's performance was on a single day. Rogerson's estimate of a twenty-hour performance seems in accord with contemporary accounts, yet it would have been extremely difficult to maintain the sort of pace that such a performance would have required. Moreover, it is still a quite lengthy estimate. According to her calculations, the performance at the first station lasted thirteen hours and eighteen minutes, without pause.1 At the later stations, where there were breaks between each play, the overall performance obviously lasted much longer. Since it is difficult to imagine
audiences sitting through such long performances, the pauses between the plays probably served as intermissions for both audience and actors. It should also be remembered that Corpus Christi was a festive as well as a devotional occasion. Friar Melton, in his famous 1426 sermon, pointed out that the people "attend not only to the play on the same feast, but also greatly to feastings, drunkenness, clamours, gossipings, and other wantonness, engaging the least in the divine service of the office of that day" (YR, II, 728). It is quite likely that there was some amount of coming and going among the spectators. The Play was an annual event; possibly some members of the audience came to see only their favorite plays.

The greatest obstacle to estimating the duration of the Play is the consideration that the cycle underwent many changes throughout its history. Only the register survives to serve as a basis for estimations, and it is clear that the plays of the register represent only one stage of the cycle's existence. With no indications of what the cycle was like at any other time, it is impossible to speculate further on the nature of the Play's performance throughout its entire history.

The past ten years have seen a renewed critical interest in medieval cycle drama, particularly in the area of staging. Most studies have been devoted to the York and Chester Cycles, in part because their performance sites have
been definitely located, as opposed to the Towneley and N-Town Cycles. Moreover, the greatest number of records pertaining to medieval drama are associated with these cities. The issue of staging has led to reexamination of the surviving evidence; the recent publication of the York dramatic records is indicative of this trend. A renewed interest in the plays has also provided the stimulus for a much needed new edition of the York Cycle, forthcoming from the Early English Text Society.

Modern productions of mystery plays have become increasingly popular, and many productions in recent years have made some attempt to perform the plays according to their traditional method of staging. In 1977, the York Cycle, performed in its entirety for the first time since the Middle Ages, was produced processionally at the University of Toronto. It was, as Johnston described it, "not a re-creation but an experiment"; however, the resulting production offered important implications for the theory of processional staging that tend to verify some of the possibilities suggested in this study. Primarily, the producers of the cycle at Toronto found that a processional performance was easily managed, and that delegating each play to a different group was considerably less complicated than production of the entire cycle by a single group. David Parry, Artistic Director of the production, particularly noted the suitability of the plays for outdoor performance.
rapport, impossible in the more artificial setting of a theater, was established by the participants with the audience, creating an atmosphere that Parry termed "the whole continuum of life." The apparent distractions of the outdoor setting, rather than intruding on the dramatic action, became a part of it. Although some members of the audience devotedly remained in their places for the entire performance, most came and went throughout the day, some following favorite plays from station to station. When bad weather forced the performance indoors, the production, rather than being shorter as Nelson proposed, actually took much longer because of the time required to change scenes. However, while these observations may provide some insights into the staging of the Play, they must remain speculative. Perhaps a production of the cycle at York using twelve stations would provide more specific answers.

At present, the greatest critical need is for study of the origins of cycle drama. The theory that the cycles evolved from the twelfth-century tropes has been largely discarded, primarily because of the lack of evidence from the supposed transitional period between the tropes and the cycle plays. The prevalent theory that the cycles developed from Corpus Christi processions must also be rejected, as not all the cycles were performed processionally, nor were all associated with Corpus Christi. The Play at York, as has been demonstrated, was in no way related to the
procession. Much of the discussion of processional staging is dependent on determination of its origins, but this area of study has generally been neglected.

The critical question of the staging of cycle drama has helped to develop a new attitude toward the plays, as well as a new interest in their staging techniques. However, the plays themselves have often been obscured by the issue of staging. Scholarship must attempt to apply theories of staging to the plays themselves. The plays can no longer be regarded as crude and quaint relics of the past, interesting only as precursors to Shakespeare, or for their humor, as in the case of the often-studied Wakefield *Second Shepherds' Play*, a very fine but not very typical mystery play. Although many of the York plays are light and entertaining, it must be stressed that they are primarily devotional and didactic in nature, relating the story of man's Fall and Redemption, with their chief focus on the Passion sequence.

Cycle drama must be read and studied as a genre, with these elements in mind. These plays belong to a time when religion played an active part in daily life, when it was not unusual for civic government to participate in religious celebrations. In 1399, the York *A/Y Memorandum Book* proclaimed that the Corpus Christi Play was performed "in honour and reverence of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the glory and benefit of the same city" (*YR*, II, 697). The Play was, from its inception, both a civic and religious institution.
The physical obstacles of processional staging, particularly the extraordinary length of time involved, however perplexing to present-day scholars, apparently were of far less consequence to the citizens of medieval York. The staging traditions of the York Corpus Christi Play, established by the early fifteenth century, still governed the Play at the time of its suppression late in the sixteenth century. Medieval cycle drama, in form, staging, and enduring popularity, was like no other dramatic tradition in the history of English literature. If the production circumstances of processional staging seem difficult to a modern audience, the plays themselves nonetheless remain a vital literary form, capable of moving a modern audience as effectively as a medieval one.
NOTES


3 Johnston, 3-4.


5 Parry, 25.
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