The Critical Heritage of the York Cycle

by

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This thesis is a chronological survey of the history of scholarship on the York cycle of mystery plays (British Library MS Additional 35290). Beginning with the late nineteenth century context into which the editio princeps by Lucy Toulmin Smith emerged. this thesis explores the critical currents which have shaped the development of the study of medieval drama as an academic discipline. The York cycle was selected as the vehicle for this study because its performance and questions relating to its staging have profoundly affected the field as a whole.

After the late sixteenth-century suppression of the Biblical play cycles in England, they remained obscure. well beyond the boundaries of "literature", until they began to spark the interest of antiquarians who studied them to discover archaic word-forms and behaviours. The paradigm of evolutionary development permitted their acceptance as literature under the category of "pre-Shakespearean drama": in the early twentieth century, studies focused on their origins and relations to other surviving examples of early drama. The increasing precision of these studies, and the popular performances of an abridged version for the York Festival from 1951 onward, led to a radical re-evaluation of the cycle’s literary qualities which discarded the evolutionary framework. Since the late 1950s, three interconnected branches of scholarship have developed: theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches, performance scholarship, and records research. These final three chapters examine each of these in greater detail. The question of whether the York cycle is "literature" remains current: I argue that it is. although surprisingly few studies have effectively addressed the point.
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This book is dedicated to my father, and to the memory of my mother.

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This thesis is an examination of the history of scholarship on the York cycle. It was inspired by a number of factors: my initial perception about the field was that it was open, barely touched - unlike studies on Shakespeare or Chaucer, for example. Closer examination revealed a great deal of scholarship, most of which could not be taken seriously. "What we know" was often characterized in negative terms: We now know, for example, that the cycle of plays at York (probably) did not evolve from liturgical plays, that its form of staging and organization were unique and not characteristic of medieval English theatre, that its end was not caused by the advent of classically-inspired forms of Renaissance drama, that it was not controlled by the Church but by the civic authorities, that it is neither boring nor intolerable in performance; that its text is not artistically amateurish or interesting merely as a predecessor of Shakespeare, or as the product of unified authorial intent. This bulk of discarded scholarship, and this great pile of "nots" have directed this study to the process by means of which the basic information and approaches in a field of literature have changed so drastically. This thesis is an exploration of process, of the factors which have caused a generation of scholars to redefine their field.

I chose to write about the York cycle for a number of reasons: York has frequently been used as an exemplar of what was 'typical' about medieval English drama; movements in York scholarship have often preceded or spurred those in the field of medieval drama scholarship at large; York was the first cycle to be performed and the first of the Records of Early English Drama volumes to appear; the surviving evidence from York is more complete than for any other instance in the corpus of medieval English drama. I have examined as much of the material written about the York plays as possible for the period 1885-1985, essentially the period framed by Lucy Toulmin Smith's edition of the cycle in 1885 and Richard Beadle's in 1982. This period was chosen for practical reasons of containment, and also because my interest is primarily in the series of shifts which have preceded what is now considered to be "modern scholarship". By 1984, Records of Early English Drama had published the records for York, Richard Beadle had re-edited the text and the text was also
available in facsimile, research performances had demonstrated the dynamics of wagon staging, and the evolutionary underpinnings of the early scholarship were fairly thoroughly debunked. This study is therefore an exploration of the responses generated by Lucy Toulmin Smith's edition. It is the story of the beginnings and development of an academic discipline.

The word "story" is problematic. A great deal of discarded scholarship was based on the teleological conception that the medieval plays in general, and the York plays in particular were worth studying because they were a piece of the story of the development of English literature. This progressivist organicism led to a lot of mistakes, one of which was the tendency to study the plays only for their relationships forward and backward on an imposed, artificially devised evolutionary scale; a second was the tendency to generalize, with its attendant dangers of mixed-up chronology and geography. However, a survey of changes over a period of time tends to be organized in the form of a story. I have tried to assemble the materials of my research neutrally to prevent the "story" from causing me to misjudge the importance or value of these materials at the time when they were published. The story is still there: in the beginning there were a few antiquarians with very specific personal reasons for their interest in the plays; at the end there were large numbers of professional academics with vastly improved resources for research who were still interested in them for a variety of different reasons. The story is in the development of how and why. This is the heritage which has shaped the field.

Initially, the ideas of Jauss seemed to provide a key to understanding this process. Jauss' theory was about literature; this thesis tested whether it worked on the critical level as well. Jauss said that each literary work came in response to what preceded it, answering the questions it had raised and thus opening the horizon of expectations of the reader a little bit further and raising further questions of its own which would then have to be addressed by the next work. It seemed an ideal model of progression. A chronological examination of each piece of scholarship in the field should reveal how it responded to what had preceded it and what new questions it raised for the next piece. A story would emerge.

The story which emerged is about academic Darwinism. In the late nineteenth
century a biological metaphor developed which merged a number of contemporary ideas, not all of which were Darwin's. Literary studies, particularly of medieval drama, were profoundly influenced by this metaphor; one might almost say caused by it. The medieval plays were interesting to the first generation of literary scholars who studied them because they appeared to demonstrate its validity. Ideologically, the Corpus Christi plays were initially interesting for philological reasons; the philological movement had developed out of German biblical scholarship and out of the search for the linguistic roots of a pure "Aryan" language. English scholarship often imitated the Germans in this respect, by seeking signs of English national characteristics in the plays. Meanwhile Darwinism grew into social Darwinism (a catch-all term with associations of colonialism and eugenics) and was eventually linked with the horrors of Nazi Germany. Studies of the York cycle became more detailed and less generalized, and the evolutionary metaphor became more cumbersome and less applicable. It came under attack just after World War II and was discarded soon thereafter, because it no longer fit the known facts, and because its progressivist and nationalist undertones had become politically incorrect. Its previous role, in this case the justification for study of the medieval plays, was filled by a number of new reasons. The content of this thesis is thus the story of the rise and fall of evolutionary thought in studies of the York cycle.

Its form is a side effect of the fact that it is a product of the University of Toronto, a centre of performance and records study of the medieval drama. Like a volume of the Records of Early English Drama project, the thesis was initially arranged chronologically, with a minimum of commentary. However, because it tells a story which is an imposed arrangement, it was necessary to impose some order and to organize the final two chapters thematically, on performance and its interactions with scholarship, and on the mid-seventies controversy over processional staging and its results.

This study does not demonstrate a predictable order to literary studies of the York cycle; people wrote about the York plays for different reasons and audiences, and their responses did not always come in neatly progressive order. Shifts in approach were not always simply the product of a widened horizon of expectations left by the last publication;
people came at the plays in new ways because of the intangible but momentous changes in zeitgeist which have characterized the twentieth century. The field of York cycle studies is not a closed system; it shows the marks of Darwin and Freud and Marx and Brecht and Auerbach and the wars and Hitler. There was also the factor of academic fashion; the approaches taken to the York plays seemed to vary as much in response to changing methodologies in the field of English literature at large as to each other. Finally, the dates of published studies are not always an accurate indicator of their time of composition, and the studies themselves do not provide a complete picture of the field: especially since the mid-sixties, ideas and controversies have been discussed at conferences and performances; however, this study is necessarily bound to the printed evidence.

There were two (intertwined) strands of study of medieval drama, social and textual, and both originated in the use of the plays as evidence which supported the religious and political ideals of the late nineteenth century, conspicuously underwritten by the Darwinian theory of evolution. The evolutionary metaphor for the progression of the English theatre towards Shakespeare in turn mirrored political arguments for the development of the British Empire.

Because the precepts of evolution played such a profound role in the beginnings of early drama scholarship, some discussion of Darwin is in order. Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) introduced the biological theory of natural selection:

> Assuming random variation among the individuals making up a population, Darwin argued that some characteristics will, by chance, be better adapted to changes in the environment than others. Given the 'struggle for existence' caused by the tendency for overpopulation, the better adapted individuals will survive and breed, passing their advantages on to their descendants, who will make up an ever-greater proportion of the succeeding generations. Over a long period of time this natural selection of random variation will produce a significant change in a population, enough to turn it into a new species.

Darwin did not argue this point socially or progressively, but his ideas provided a model of a mechanism by which species came into existence; and if species, then why not races.

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languages, literary forms? Recent scholarship has demonstrated that Darwin's ideas were part of a complex of ideas already present in the early nineteenth century, and that they were not initially in conflict with the religious establishment because they were understood progressively:

... religious thinkers were in a position to accept it and to argue that evolution might in fact be God's own method of creation.

The crucial factor that made this kind of compromise possible was the belief that evolution was an essentially purposeful process.... The first generation of evolutionists followed the philosopher Herbert Spencer in his belief that the history of life on earth represented the unfolding of a developmental sequence aimed at the production of higher things. (Bowler Darwinism 6)

The implication that God's will was behind this purposeful progression came out of a turn of phrase in Darwin's own work:

In the first edition of 1859 Darwin wrote, 'It may be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinizing, throughout the world, every variation'.... If we consult Morse Peckham's Variorum Text of the Origin of Species.... we find that Darwin has revised this sentence to begin 'It may metaphorically be said...' (p.169)! In subsequent editions he made further exasperated efforts to deny the intentionalist bias...

This progressive understanding is the fundamental aspect of the form of Darwinism which shaped early drama studies. The plays were of interest, not for their intrinsic literary value, but as evidence of two beginnings: of the English dramatic tradition, and of English social custom. Either might in turn be used as evidence of English 'character'. The phrase "the manners and customs of our forefathers" occurred with striking regularity throughout the scholarship of this period. "Architectural" and "botanical" metaphors appeared frequently.

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The architectural metaphor appeared more often in earlier scholarship, which characterized the medieval drama as the foundation stone upon which the stately edifice of the Elizabethan theatre was raised, "the religious Mysteries and Moralities which laid the foundation of our National Drama." Particularly from the 1860's, the focus on biological evolution led to the pervasive and extremely long-lived use of plant imagery in discussions of the plays, as in this example:

Renascence and Reformation... contributed to prepare and fertilize the soil into which was to descend the seed of genius, the gift of Heaven.5

This fascination with roots, foundations and beginnings is readily apparent in the amount of argument, often very stretched, which was dedicated to dating the exact origin of the plays, and in the desire to place them at dates far earlier than the evidence allowed, despite the availability of arguments to the contrary. Darwinism was much more than a biological theory of natural selection; it could express the Divine will, which in this case, had ordained Shakespeare as the pinnacle of dramatic art. The quasi-divine status to which Shakespeare appreciation had risen sanctioned the textual search for his antecedents. The late-eighteenth century movement into the intense appreciation (with overtones of worship) of Shakespeare6 led to an interest in the particulars of his life, his theatre, his context in the early nineteenth. The popularity of the bard in the nineteenth century hinged upon the perception of his work as a fully realized vision of human possibilities. Wolfgang Iser said regarding Carlyle's nineteenth-century bardolotry:

Shakespeare figures as a guarantee that humankind can master its own world. Against such a background, one can understand his sanctification, since his

4Thomas Sharp Ancient Mysteries from the Digby Manuscripts (Edinburgh: The Abbotsford Club, 1835)


6Brian Vickers Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) noted that between 1778 and 1793, six new editions of Shakespeare's works appeared. "His prestige is now so great that he is seen not only as England's greatest writer, but as the world's greatest, an altogether exceptional human being." (Vol. 6, p.1)
work brings the world under control, and indeed he has recreated the world.... Carlyle does not explicitly reject the Shakespeare conceived by the Romantics as the paragon of genius, but he remolds him into the bearer of hope.... Once again we have an appropriation of Shakespeare, which... shows to what extent the image of Shakespeare is fashioned according to the needs of the time.7

By the end of the nineteenth century, this reading of Shakespeare had produced a new set of questions. The field of Shakespearean philology sought "to disclose the past from which their subject's work had arisen" in order to "correct the preceding phase in Shakespearean exegesis" so that "previous ideological interpretations of his work [could] be broken down" (Iser 12). The search for Shakespeare's past turned up the medieval drama, and therefore early textual studies of the medieval drama evaluated it primarily in terms of its relationship to Shakespeare.

Socially-oriented studies of the medieval plays tended to have a slightly more revolutionary flavour, a critical stance which one might anachronistically term 'Marxist'. The strand of thought which sought the origin of social customs had an eloquent speaker in John Ruskin (1819-1900), who played a large role in shaping Victorian medievalism. Beginning as an art historian, Ruskin became an outspoken critic of his own society, using the examples drawn from the middle ages to castigate the effects of the heartless economic policies of the Utilitarian school. His perceptions of the middle ages were often coloured by his anger at the contrast they made with the conditions of his own time; the period became idealized as a time when Christian charity permitted all men to work at labour which involved the imagination. "The Nature of Gothic", the central chapter of The Stones of Venice, was released in 1853. It was an immediately and enduringly influential essay, the ideas of which percolated, by way of F.J. Furnivall, the founder of the Early English Text Society, into middle English and medieval drama studies. His most recent editor said of the work:

In 1854, the year after it appeared, the Working Men's College opened in London. One of its philanthropic founders, F.J. Furnivall, asked Ruskin if the chapter might be reprinted as a pamphlet to be given free of charge to all...

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working men attending the courses. Ruskin agreed, and into the bargain, offered the college the profits he made on sales. Around the same time, The Stones of Venice changed the lives of two young Oxford students, Edward Burne-Jones, and William Morris. Thirty-eight years later, Morris' Kelmscott Press issued "The Nature of Gothic" as a single book... It was eventually to inspire Morris's Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings... It gave enormous impetus and critical weight to the Gothic Revival.  

Ruskin characterized the gothic by the presence of a majority of the following six features: savageness, changefulness, naturalism, grotesqueness, rigidity, and redundance. For each of these words, he provided a positive reading. The savage or rude quality of gothic art was to be admired both as an index of harsh climactic conditions, and as an indicator of a society in which the work of every man was valued: "they thus receive the results of the labour of inferior minds; and out of fragments full of imperfection... indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole." (Ruskin 83) Gothic naturalism was valued in part because it was filled with "copious records of all the domestic customs and inferior arts of the ages in which it flourished." (Ruskin 102) In the rigidity of gothic art, he found "the Protestant spirit of self-dependence and inquiry... expressed in its every line"; traces of the traits he admired in his own England:  

the moral habits to which England in this age owes the kind of greatness that she has, - the habits of philosophical investigation, of accurate thought, of domestic seclusion and independence, of stern self-reliance and sincere upright searching into religious truth, - were only traceable in the features which were the distinctive creation of the Gothic schools. (Ruskin 107-108)  

Ruskin used the middle ages as a foil in which he could display what he judged to be the flaws and the virtues of his own England. This habit of appropriating the period as an ideal characterized both social and textual readings of the York cycle for a very long time. These 'schools' were not in fact separate entities; Shakespeare studies dominated studies of early English texts and social commentary often appeared as asides or footnotes in textually-oriented studies.

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Chapter One
The Nineteenth-century Context of Lucy Toulmin Smith's Edition

This chapter examines the context of scholarship into which Lucy Toulmin Smith's 1885 edition emerged. It explores the development of scholarship on medieval biblical drama in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, examining particularly the reasons which each editor or author provided for his (or her) interest in these texts in order to display the range of available attitudes toward the medieval drama. Why were these texts studied? To what ends were they put? In what sort of arguments were they used? What follows is a chronological overview of the scholarship on medieval drama which was available to Lucy Toulmin Smith in 1885. Its purpose is to establish the intellectual context which shaped her edition of the cycle, and within which her edition was then received. It is not intended to demonstrate that this early scholarship is outdated; the purpose of this examination is to observe the process by which the Victorians who wrote about medieval drama came to the conclusions they reached. These sources are of interest because they reveal the motivations for early scholarship.

By the time the York edition was published, editions of the Coventry\(^1\), Towneley\(^2\), N-Town (then identified as Ludus Coventriae)\(^3\), Chester\(^4\), and Digby\(^5\) plays were available.

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The first commentaries on the early drama were based on a few quotations by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century antiquarians which were used repeatedly for widely varying speculations about the history of performance, the origins of the text, the possibilities of staging and the relations of civic and ecclesiastical authorities to the performances.

An often-quoted source of outside information about the medieval drama was the description of the Chester plays contained in the Rogers' *Brevaries*. There are five versions of the *Brevaries*, written successively during the early seventeenth century. They were attributed to Archdeacon Robert Rogers, but for the most part were composed after his death by his son David from materials the Archdeacon collected during his life. By reproducing the Late Banns, the *Brevaries* gave substance to the tradition which stated that the Chester plays were written by Ranulph Higden, and first performed during the mayoralty of Chester's first mayor, John Arneway. Although early scholars quickly attacked the connection to Higden, they held tenaciously to that with Arneway. The Rogers entry concerning the mayoralty of Arneway was quoted as follows by James Markland, the first editor of the Chester cycle:

1269. Sir John Arneway, Knight. In this year ye Whitsun plays were invented in Chester by one Rondoll Higden, a monk in the Abbye of Chester, and afterwards set forth in action, at the cost and charge of the Citizens, which was great charges; and note yt this monk was a pious man, and a great

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7Lawrence Clopper "The History and Development of the Chester Cycle" *Modern Philology* 75 (1978) 219-246 suggests that the Late Banns were originally composed in 1548-61 and underwent two revisions in 1561-72, based on the evidence of varying stanzaic forms.

writer in yt Abby, as his bookes yet shew; in great devotion and discretion he
published ye story of ye Bible, yt the simple in their own language might
understand. (Harl. MSS. 2125 fol. 272)

The connection with Ameway made it possible to date the Chester plays sometime in the late
thirteenth or very early fourteenth century. This is significant, because it provided the basis
of the claim that the plays originated in the fourteenth (or even the late thirteenth) rather than
the fifteenth century. Greater antiquity could then explain the 'primitive' qualities of the
cycles, and provide the necessary duration for their chronological 'evolution' into the
moralities. The early dating of the plays permitted them to stand at the beginning of a story:
the critical narrative of the history of English drama.

The Brevaries also provided a long-lived standard for imagining medieval staging
methods:

these pagiantes or carige was a highe place made like a howse with 2 rowmes
being open on the tope. the lower rowme theie. apparelled and dressed
them selves. and the higher rowme[s] theie played. and thei stoode vpon vj
wheelas. and when the had donne with one cariage in one place theie wheled
the same from one streete to another... (Clopper "Rogers" 85)¹

Medieval English drama was thus perceived as a quaint processional performance on a
cumbersome, multi-storied, wheeled stage.

A second frequently quoted source was the following passage about the plays in
Coventry from William Dugdale's Antiquities of Warwickshire¹⁰:

Before the suppression of the monasteries, this citye was very famous for the
pageants that were play'd therein, upon Corpus Christi day; which
occasioning very great confluence of people thither from far and near, was of
no small benefit therto; which pageants being acted with mighty state and
reverence by the fryers of this house, had theaters for the severall scenes, very
large and high, placed upon wheels, and drawn to all the eminent parts of the
city, for the better advantage of spectators: and contain'd the story of the New
Testament, composed into old English Rithme, as appeareth by an ancient

¹Later versions of the Brevaries changed the number of wheels on the cart from 6 to 4.
Clopper suggested that this variation originated in a misreading of the roman numeral iv as vi.

MS. [In bibl. Cotton sub effigie Vesp. D.9.] intituled Ludus Corporis Christi, or Ludus Coventriæ. I have been told by some old people, who in their younger years were eye-witnesses of these pageants so acted, that the yearly confluence of people to see that shew was extraordinary great, and yielded no small advantage to the city. (Dugdale 116)

By providing a description of high wagons which agreed with that of Rogers, Dugdale solidified the impression that large high wagons were the standard staging method for all medieval plays. He also followed Richard James, Sir Robert Cotton's librarian, in the mis-identification of the plays of the Cotton Vespasian MS with the city of Coventry. He was quoted because he provided the link between the street performances of the plays and the Church, which could then be extended as a continuous thread from the earliest Latin liturgical plays down to the last performances of biblical plays in the early seventeenth century.

A third antiquarian source which was used to add details regarding the performance of Corpus Christi plays was the description of the York plays in Drake's Eboracum. Since the MS of the York plays was not available to the scholarly community until 1885, this source was of less interest before that point because it appeared not to relate to a surviving text, as the above sources did. Drake described the procession of Corpus Christi in York, quoting at length from the civic records. His details were used in discussions of the guilds and of their links to the communal, social aspects of the medieval plays.

Before histories entirely devoted to the medieval drama were being written, the plays

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11Richard James, Sir Robert Cotton's first librarian, identified the MS upon acquiring it in 1629 as follows: "Elenchus contentorum in hoc codice Contenta novi testamenti scenice expressa et aetitata olim per monachos sive fratres mendicantes. vulgo dicitur hic liber Ludus Coventriæ. sive ludus corporis Christi. scribitur metris Anglicanis." When it was recatalogued in 1696, Coventry was not mentioned, and the Old Testament plays were. See K.S. Block Ludus Coventriæ or the Play Called Corpus Christi (Oxford: University Press, for the Early English Text Society, E.S. 120, 1922) xxxviii - xli for the eventual scholarly refutation of the Dugdale passage.

12Drake, Eboracum (York: T. Wilson and R. Spence, 1788)
were commented upon by Thomas Warton in the gigantic *History of English Poetry*. This was the ambitious production of an Oxford don which had originally been planned along lines suggested by Alexander Pope as a chronological survey of English literature from the eleventh to the eighteenth century. Although Warton did not live to see the completion of the project, it had tremendous and continuing influence:

Warton went some way to the execution of his design. His first volume was published in 1774; the second in 1778, by which time he must have seen clearly how impossible it would be for him to confine his history within the limits he had first intended. A third volume was produced in 1781, but afterwards his energy seems to have decayed, for on his death in 1790, his biographer says that "only a few of the sheets for vol. iv were printed and no part left in a state for printing." Joseph Warton talked of taking up his brother's task, but did nothing. In 1824 the *History of English Poetry* was republished under the editorship of Richard Price, who added an excellent preface of his own on "Origin of Romantic Fiction," and embodied in the work the notes of Ritson, Price and other antiquaries. This edition was reprinted in 1840 with a few fresh notes by Thomas Wright and others. In 1871 it was again reprinted with W. Carew Hazlitt as editor, two new dissertations being added to those which Warton had prefixed to his history - one on "the Seven Sages," the other on "The Lays of Marie de France"; so that Warton's work may be looked upon as a kind of classic fragment, the incompleteness of which has been emphasized by the glosses and alterations of three generations of commentators. (Courthope xi)

Although the work was often inaccurate and incomplete, it provided a large and convenient collection of information, and this encouraged the critical approach which sought to discover large trends and movements out of immense fields of minute details; as well, it stimulated interest in the literature before the eighteenth century, and more importantly, before Shakespeare:

Warton's name is a landmark in the history of English literature. His great history exerted a signal influence on its contemporary currents. Together with Percy's *Reliques*, it helped to awaken an interest in medieval and

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Elizabethan poetry. By familiarizing his contemporaries with the imaginative temper and romantic subject-matter of the poetry that was anterior to the eighteenth century, Warton's work helped to divert the stream of English verse from the formal and classical channels to which the prestige of Pope had for many years consigned it.  

Warton theorized that the origins of English drama lay in the great trade fairs established in the eighth century, which drew jugglers, minstrels and buffoons:

By degrees, the clergy, observing that the entertainments of dancing, music and mimicry... made the people less religious... proscribed these sports and excommunicated the performers. But finding no regard was paid to their censures, they changed their plan and determined to take these recreations into their own hands. They turned actors, and instead of profane mummeries, presented stories taken from legends or the Bible. (Warton 1778, vol. 2, 515)

Thus he established the connection of the clergy with the drama, one which appeared incongruous and therefore needed some explanation. The explanation was that the dramatic instinct must have had secular origins, and have been taken over by the Church in a cunning plan to win the peoples' hearts. For Warton, dramatized religious subject-matter and pre-Reformation religious practices were offensive; consequently the drama appeared vastly inferior in comparison to the more secular drama of the Renaissance.

Our drama seems hitherto to have been almost entirely confined to religious subjects, and these plays were nothing more than an appendage to the specious and mechanical devotion of the times.... Our very early ancestors scarce knew any other history than that of their religion.... many licentious pleasenancies were sometimes introduced in these religious representations.... In these Mysteries I have sometimes seen gross and open obscenities. In a Play of the Old and New Testament [fnt. Harl. 2013 Exhibited at Chester in the year 1327] Adam and Eve are both exhibited on the stage naked; and conversing about their nakedness... This extraordinary spectacle was beheld by a numerous assembly of both sexes with great composure. (Warton, 1778 vol. 2, 20; 24-26)

Despite the presence of apocryphal material which was offensive by its deviation from his own Protestant moral education, Warton found some virtue in these performances:

The composers of the mysteries did not think the plain and probable events of the New Testament sufficiently marvellous for an audience who wanted

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only to be surprised.... Rude and even ridiculous as they were, they softened the manners of the people, by diverting the public attention to spectacles in which the mind was concerned, and by creating a regard for other arts than those of bodily strength and savage valour. (Warton, 1778 vol. 2, 397.)

He distinguished the inventions of the apocryphal stories from those of the allegorical plays, categorically placing the moralities at a more advanced level than the biblical plays:

The miracle-plays, or MYSTERIES, were totally destitute of invention or plan: they tamely represented stories according to the letter of scripture, or the respective legend. But the MORALITIES indicate dawning of the dramatic art; they contain some rudiments of a plot and even attempt to delineate characters and paint manners. (Warton, 1778 vol. 2, 24.)

Like Dugdale, Warton associated the performance of plays with religious subject-matter with the control of the Church and thus with a corruption of both artistic and religious standards:

The Franciscan Friars of Coventry, whose sacred interludes, presented on Corpus Christi Day in that city and at other places make so conspicuous a figure in the history of English drama... [fnt.: The friars themselves were the actors. But this practice being productive of some enormities, and the laity growing as wise as the clergy, at least as well qualified to act plays; there was an injunction at the Mexican council, ratified at Rome in the year 1589, to prohibit all clerks from playing in the mysteries, even on Corpus Christi day.] (Warton 1778 vol. 2, p. 349)

Warton sketched a picture of the cycle plays as the unthinking productions of a corrupt caste of monk-players, who plied their innocent but stupid audiences with nudity and invented legends in order to keep their attention; these productions gradually gave way to the moralities, in which some sense of authorial imagination and moral education began to develop, and to the increasing wisdom of the laity. The sense of progression was thus a feature of thought in early drama scholarship long before Darwin published The Origin of Species in 1859.

An anonymous contributor to the Gentleman’s Magazine listed the records from Dublin and the evidence of the Chester MSS, and even mentioned the York MS, although

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16anon. "Solemnities of Corpus Christi Day Illustrated" Gentleman’s Magazine 54:2 (February 1784) 102-104. Signed "Q". Lucy Toulmin Smith refers to this writer as "L." in her edition of the plays.
it was not yet identified as such:

We find that the solemnities of Corpus Christi Day (generally thought to be peculiar to Coventry...) were performed at Dublin with great preparation of pageants.... In Thoresby's MS of Corpus Christi Play, by Thos. Cutler and Rich. Nandyke, now in Mr. Walpole's possession, the trades mentioned are.... We see here the origins of our stage-plays, which were at first only those pageants which after-ages levelled to the decoration of a Lord Mayor's show.

The article was published as a brief compendium of information about the plays, and offered no further critical apparatus.17

The sudden popularity of Percy's Reliques18, which provided samples of old poetry in the form of secular ballads, demonstrates a new interest in the past which was developing at the end of the eighteenth century. Percy's ballads, and the romantic figure of the wandering minstrel which they evoked made the middle ages safe and attractive.

The book seemed a fresh well, a "Diamond of the Desert," newly opened amidst the dry sandy wastes and brackish streams of a wilderness of literature.... -the prejudice men feel in favour of the old was enlisted in behalf of the new, and the book assumed at once the interest of a birth and a

17This mention of the York MS is printed in Ralph Thoresby's Ducatus Leodiensis: The Topography of the Ancient and Populous Town and Parish of Leeds (London: Maurice Atkins 1715) 517. Thoresby listed it as 17th in his catalogue of folio manuscripts, as follows:

**Corpus Christi Playe** in antique English Verse, by Tho. Cutler and Rich. Nandyke; take a taste of the poetry in the Crucifixio Christi.

and went on to quote eight lines and name several of the "antiquated" trades in the "several scenes". A.C. Cawley said of this first quotation from the York MS:

his understanding of the text left a lot to be desired.... Thoresby (or his printer) has made nonsense of the text by arranging to quatrains with alternate rhymes (abababab) as to monothymed quatrains (aaaabbbb). Further, he omits the two speakers' names, and so reduces the dialogue to a continuous passage of verse.


18Thomas Percy Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1765. Second edition, 1767, reprint 1794; third 1838; fourth 1858, etc.) The second and third editions contain similar versions of the essay "On the Origin of the English Stage".
Percy suggested that the origins of English drama lay in "a kind of dumb shews, intermingled, it may be, with a few short speeches; at length they grew into a regular series of connected dialogues, formally divided into acts and scenes." Although the early plays available to him fell far short of classical standards, Percy found the roots of Shakespeare's tragedies, comedies and histories in the morality plays, which he considered to be more advanced than the biblical plays:

The Mysteries were very inartificial, representing the scripture stories simply according to the letter. But the Moralities are not devoid of invention: they exhibit outlines of a fable or plot, and even attempt to delineate characters or manners. (Percy 107-108)

Percy did not refer to any specific textual example of a 'mystery'; his readings apparently began with Hickscorner and Everyman, which were available in Hawkins' 1773 anthology. He may have known about the 'mysteries' from Warton's work; the "Essay on the Origin of the English Stage" did not appear until the third edition of the Reliques in 1795. Early scholarship often showed a tendency to secularize readings of the medieval plays in order to neutralize religious content which would otherwise have been offensive to Protestant critics; Percy seems to have shown the way.

In 1801, Strutt's Sports and Pastimes of the People of England appeared. Drawing on the earlier success of his Manners and Customs of the People of England, Strutt provided numerous redrawings of manuscript illuminations to illustrate his commentary on

19 George Golfillan "Life of Thomas Percy" in Percy's Reliques (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1858) x-xi.


21 Hawkins Origin of the English Drama (Oxford, 1773) vol. 1 p. 27.


23 Joseph Strutt Manners and Customs of the English People (London, n.d.)
the often amusing practices of his forefathers. He described customs at every level from rural to royal and included a short, undetailed description of the Ludus Coventriae play, and part of the Digby Conversion of Saul. In Manners and Customs Strutt described his vision of early staging, which rested upon a history prominently featuring reform:

In the early dawn of literature, and when the Sacred Mysteries were the only theatrical performances, what is now called the stage did then consist of three several platforms, or stages, raised one above another; on the uppermost sat the Pater Coelestis, surrounded with his angels; on the second appeared the holy saints and glorified men; and the last and lowest was occupied by mere men, who had not yet passed from this transitory life to the regions of eternity. On one side of this lowest platform was a dark pitchy cavern, from whence issued appearance of fire and flames; and when it was necessary, the audience were treated with hideous yellings and noises, as imitative of the howlings and cries of the wretched souls tormented by the relentless daemons. From this yawning cave the devils themselves constantly ascended, to delight and to instruct the spectators; to delight, because they were usually the greatest jesters and buffoons that then appeared; and to instruct, for that they treated the wretched mortals who were delivered to them with the utmost cruelty, warning thereby all men carefully to avoid falling into the clutches of such hardened and remorseless spirits. But in the more improved state of the theatre, and when regular plays were introduced, all this mummery was abolished, and the whole cavern and devils, together with the highest platform before mentioned, entirely taken away, two platforms only then remaining; and these continued a considerable time in use, the upper stage serving them for chambers, or any elevated situations (as when some of the actors should, from the walls of cities or the like, discourse with those who were standing under them on the lower platforms.) This appears from several entries to be found in the old editions of the first plays, where mention is often made of the upper and lower stages.24

Strutt gave no evidence of the source for this description of the early, heaven-and-hell stage and although it was rejected by later scholars like Sharp, the picturesque image of a multi-levelled stage equipped with screaming devils remained associated with the medieval plays for popular authors like William Hone, who edited Strutt's Sports and Pastimes in 1841, and authored at least two more volumes of similar material with a strong anti-Catholic bias.

In 1818, James Markland edited the first complete Middle English biblical plays for

24 quoted by Thomas Sharp in Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry (Coventry: Merridew & Son, 1825) 24.
publication. Five hundred copies of the Noah's Flood and Slaughter of the Innocents plays from Chester were printed for the Roxburgh Club. His choice of plays was based on the presence of the apocryphal stories of the resistance of Noah's wife, and the death of Herod's son. In his introduction, Markland immediately moved to the topic of dating the plays, concluding:

The authorities before cited sufficiently prove that both in France and England dramatic performances indisputably prevailed at a period of very remote antiquity, and, added to other testimony, confirm the theory which it is the object of these pages to support, that the Chester Mysteries are even of an earlier date than 1328... (Markland iv)

He eventually argued for a date of composition of 1269, based on the connection to Arneway, and then discussed the presence of apocryphal material in the plays. These inclusions were explained as "calculated to relieve the solemnity of the plot, and to amuse the fancies of a mixed, and, for the most part, an unlettered audience" (Markland x), since "the gratification of the audience was one of the chief motives for acting these plays, and this end would not have been obtained had not the sombre character of the plots been relieved by a species of buffoonery adapted to their taste." (Markland xi) Finally, he theorized vaguely about French connections in the search for an Ur-text:

The traces of resemblance apparent in the English and Foreign Mysteries, as well in the choice of subjects, as in the manner of treating them, are so numerous and striking, that we cannot but attribute these productions to one common source. (Markland xi)

Markland's presentation depicted the Chester plays as ancient, foreign, and vulgar; curiosities by virtue of their antiquity, their departures from scripture, their connection to the tastes of the "folk", and their relation to the beginnings of English literature.

In 1820, the first volume of The Retrospective Review, a journal dedicated to antiquarian interests, was published. As a part of its mandate, it undertook to explore the beginnings of the English stage, and therefore this first issue contained an examination of the available information about medieval drama. Its anonymous author had little joy in his

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25anon. "Mysteries, Moralities and Other Early Drama" Retrospective Review 1 (1820) 332-357. The author took quotations from the Chester Creation and the Digby 'Killing of
Before, however, we can enter upon this task, with any pleasure either to our readers or ourselves, it will be necessary to take a review of the earliest specimens of the dramatic art in this kingdom, if we may be allowed to apply the term of art to compositions as artificial, as crude and jejune, as can be well imagined. (anon., 1820, 332)

He concluded that the Mysteries were "neither more nor less than a few chapters of the Bible stripped of all their simplicity - of all their solemnity and of all their poetry, and converted into English verse." (anon., 1820, 334) Their original appeal, therefore, must have been in the (otherwise unavailable) access to God's Word which they offered to their original audiences:

The devotion of the people to sacred plays is not surprising. The capacious soul of man is not satisfied with things of this world.... The effect even of the insipid Mysteries on the general mind must have been great... (anon., 1820, 338)


The epigraph, by "Shakespeare", read "Is it possible the spells of Apocrypha should juggle men into such strange Mysteries?" Hone's approach to the drama was spurred by his populist approach interest in apocrypha. Having read the Ludus Coventriae MS in the British Museum, he published *The Apocryphal New Testament* in the Children' (first published in Hawkins' *Origin of the English Drama* Oxford, 1773), and noted the Ludus Coventriae MS.


This quotation is from *Henry VIII* I.iii 1-2, and correctly reads "Is it possible the spells of France should juggle men into such strange mysteries?" As the play is from the first folio, there is no corrupt source for the reading: Hone interposed the word apocrypha himself.
order to "explain the subjects of pictures and prints that are without explanation from any other source" (Hone Ancient Mysteries ii), and was promptly involved in a pamphlet attack. Ancient Mysteries Described included parts of eight episodes from the Marian plays of the N-Town cycle with marginal quotations from Hone's "Apocryphal New Testament" to demonstrate similarities. The plays were exhibited as specimens of odd behaviours of times past. His organization was jumbled, fanciful; he said of his work, "it is altogether 'skimble-skamble stuff.'" (Hone Ancient Mysteries vi) He quoted Dugdale and Drake and Rogers, giving the Drake quotes about York in full, in order "to convey some notion of the general method of representing them in other cities." (Hone Ancient Mysteries 213). Hone's approach to the medieval drama was shaped by his political radicalism and the traumatic experience of a three-day trial on charges of blasphemous libel for the publication of parodies of the catechism and Creed which mocked contemporary social conditions. He identified with the curious and lovable habits of the people, but strongly protested against the power of the clergy and crown.

Insofar as his examples illustrate the popular mind, or have that "ludicrous" or "monstrous" quality embraced by his wide definition of "parody", then he has a sympathetic understanding of them, and a love or an affection for them; but insofar as they illustrate the corruption of the people by priestcraft, then he can express a disgust equal to Warton's at the "gross practices and delusions", as he writes in his preface. Both affection and horror thus help to motivate his antiquarian researches. (Robinson, "Regency Radicalism" 136)

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28 Quarterly October 1821; Hone's reply appeared in November 1821. Hone's version of the Apocryphal New Testament was attacked by H.J. Rose, a high churchman, as irreligious. It was printed in the form of the Authorized Version, and looked quite aggressively biblical. Hone claimed in the preface "several of the papal pageants for the populace and the monkish mysteries performed as drama... are almost verbatim representations of the stories." Ancient Mysteries Described was thus a justification of his Apocryphal New Testament. (J.W. Robinson, "Regency Radicalism and Antiquarianism: William Hone's Ancient Mysteries Described" Leeds Studies in English 10 (1978) 121-144, this quote 128.)
In 1830, Hone published a kind of almanac which explained the puzzling connection of the Church with dramatic activities. The entry for June 2, "Corpus Christi Day" related:
the Coventry mystery maker of 1416 was under circumstances that would suggest powerful motives to the cunning of a monkish mind for apocryphal adoption... a false glare might obscure the dawning of the human mind.... These fraudulent productions were calculated to postpone the period of illumination, and to stigmatize, by implication, the labours of Wycliffe." (Hone Calendar 751-753)

Hone's work was popular throughout the nineteenth century, and groundbreaking in several ways: "in his sense of the historical, social, literary, artistic, and religious contexts of the vernacular plays... he pointed for the first time to two of the major non-biblical sources of the medieval mystery plays." (Robinson, "Regency Radicalism" 139). Hone caused the plays to become better-known, and as Robinson has pointed out, stirred interest in their contexts.

In 1824, Warton's History of English Poetry was re-released under the editorship of Richard Price; Price's introduction illuminated one of the perpetual conflicts which has marked the study of medieval English literature, between precision of detail and philosophical generalization. He criticized Warton for "an unavoidable confusion between the essence and the costume of romantic fiction, and the extensive appropriation of the common property of mankind to a particular age and people" (Warton, History of English Poetry, 1824, 19), and moved the focus from the specific to the general, from time and place to the origins of all mankind, and the common signs which these origins left inscribed on historical remnants from all times and places. Price explained the logic of his methodology as follows:

The fictions of one period... are found to have had an existence in that immediately preceding; and the further we pursue the investigation, the more we become convinced of a regular transmission through the succession of time.... till at length the question escapes us as a matter of historical research, and resolves itself into one purely psychological.... [In] the infancy of society.... man regards himself... as the associate and fellow of all that exists around him..... It is this personification of the blind efforts of nature, which has given rise to these wild and distorted elements that abound in all profane

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29William Hone The Every Day Book and Table Book, Or Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements (London: Thomas Tegg, 1830)
cosmogonies.... The whole religious system of the ancient world, with one exception, may be adduced as an exemplification of the fact; and even the sacred writings of the Old Testament contain occasional indications of a similar practice.... Whether in ancient Greece or modern Europe, every object is found to have a chronicle of its origin.... The wildest efforts of the imagination can only exhibit to us a fresh combination of well-known types drawn from the storehouse of imagination. (Warton, History of English Poetry 1824 18-26)

The new edition demonstrated the continuing currency of Warton's work, and the growth of interest in the literature of the middle ages, and it focussed this interest on a search for human origins. It provided a moral explanation and argument for the practice of generalizing for the sake of arriving at these narratives: [though] "We shall gain little perhaps... for the history of human events... however fallacious historically considered, [they] are never without a powerfully redeeming good, the ethical tendency of all their lessons." (Warton, History of English Poetry 1824 80) The materials which the original Warton edition provided stimulated Price to question where the productions of the human imagination originated; his new approach sought a creation story with a strong moralizing influence and reflects an increasing sense of progressivism.

To Warton's discussion of medieval drama, Price added a number of references to Strutt's Sports and Pastimes of Old England and a long footnote commenting on the Chester cycle. Using Markland's information (without attribution) from the Rogers' Brevaryes and the Late Banns from Chester, he placed the beginnings of Corpus Christi drama in the early fourteenth century, concluding that the plays were written or translated from Latin into English by Don Randall, during the mayoralty of John Arneway (1327), and that an indulgence was obtained by Henry Frances from Pope Clement in 1342-1352. (Warton, History of English Poetry 1824 II 26)

The next major study of medieval plays was Sharp's Dissertation. Sharp was an interesting writer and he provided a large number of civic details because as an historian of Coventry, he had reason to read the "Account Books and other writings of the Trading

30Thomas Sharp A Dissertation on the Pageants, or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry (Coventry: Merriew & Son, 1825)
Companies." (Sharp, Coventry 2) His interest in the religious dramas was driven by his view of them as "the unquestionable groundwork of the stage." (Sharp, Coventry 1) After a brief discussion of pageant-wagons, which linked the "pagentus" of the N-Town "Trial of Mary and Joseph" play with the "celebrated cart of Thespis" (Sharp, Coventry 2) of the Greeks and Romans, he provided a careful examination of the MS Cotton Vespasian D VIII, suggesting that "it is not equally clear that [this] was the particular property of these Grey Friars, or contains a transcript of the religious plays exhibited by them". (Sharp, Coventry 5) Sharp's interest, however, was not in the Grey Friars or the N-Town MS, but in the plays performed by the trading companies in Coventry which are described in the civic records. Sharp quoted from a wide range of sources which had not previously been printed; he provided the accounts of the guilds, the diagram of the Castle of Perseverance, extensive costuming notes, a range of background material from other civic records and literary sources, and an edition of the Coventry Shearmen and Tailors' pageant with its music; he also provided examinations of Hock Tuesday performances and royal pageants in Coventry and reprinted all of Drake's information on York in an appendix. Sharp's scholarship was a breakthrough in several ways: he was as inclusive as possible with his sources, opening up huge new vistas of previously unpublished material for examination; as well, he was specific rather than general in his approach - he tended to discount theories he could not prove. However, his tendency to be encyclopedic in his choice of inclusions led writers after him to draw in the lines of connection which he often only suggested. His most useful contribution was his distinction between the plays performed in Coventry by the guilds and those of the N-Town manuscript. Although his interest was antiquarian and primarily visual, his inclusion of guild records provided the scholarly community with a wealth of details about the guilds and their participation in civic drama. His antiquarian interests were not shared by the reviewers of his work31, one of whom criticized both his methodology and the texts he edited:

Whatever certain antiquarians may delight to believe, the useful end of investigation does not consist in the laborious trifling with which attention is frittered away upon minute certainties and petty doubts. The scholar of enlarged mind and philosophical reflection will view such enquiries only in the light which they can shed upon the progress of intellect, manners, and literature: he will take care to examine only the great operations of the machinery of society, not to count every nail and peg in its original structure. We cannot choose but smile—without offense to Mr. Sharp be it spoken—on the solemnity with which he dwells on the uses of iron pins and clamps, 'tenter-hooks, rings, wire, thread and small cord.' Neither can we sympathize in his grievous lamentation over the loss of some 'drapers' book of accounts,'(p.68) which could only have accumulated his sufficient catalogue of such important articles.... (pp. 2-3)We have not a word of commendation to bestow upon his laborious industry from the Play book of the Shearmen and Taylors' Company at Coventry the whole dialogue of their pageant.... There is no intrinsic merit in this wretched and doggerel piece to render its publication at all necessary, after the similar specimens given by Mr. Markland of the Chester Mysteries; and it may only vie with some of the "precious reprints" of the Roxburgh Club. (p. 12)

This criticism demonstrates that not everyone was an antiquarian in the nineteenth century; if Sharp had not exercised such diligence, the play of the Shermen and Taylors would have been lost in the 1879 fire which destroyed its manuscript.

John Payne Collier's *The History of English Dramatic Poetry to the Time of Shakespeare and Annals of the Stage to the Restoration* appeared in 1831 as a result of the increasing interest in Shakespeare's context. Collier explained "although Warton, in his progress through other departments, has touched upon [it] cursorily and incidentally, he has not attempted to trace its [English medieval drama's] development and improvement." (Collier I:vii) He further outlined this narrative of development:

I have traced the connection between Miracle-plays, consisting in the outset only of Scripture characters, and Moral-plays... represented by allegorical personages; and I have shown how the first, almost imperceptibly, deviated into the last, by the gradual intermixture of allegory with sacred history, until Miracle-plays were finally superceded. (Collier I:ix-x)

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Collier's Annals presented a view of English dramatic performances beginning with what appeared to be saint plays in London in the late twelfth century, expanding into Corpus Christi shows all over the country within four years of the feast's introduction in 1264, and then into vaguely related court entertainments throughout the fourteenth century. The "new species of dramatic representation" (Collier 23) of the Moral play appeared in the reign of Henry VI, and plays became more common all over the realm throughout the fifteenth century; minstrels are mentioned in court shows and ceremonies; clergy are warned not to participate. Collier conjectured that

the introduction of Miracle-plays in various parts of this kingdom, if not in various parts of Europe, was more contemporaneous than it has been hitherto believed to have been. They were adopted at Chester within four years of the institution of the feast of Corpus Christi, in 1264, and the same causes which led to their exhibition in that city would operate elsewhere. (Collier II:149)

He then produced a long series of synopses of the Chester, Widkirk (Wakefield), and Coventry (N-Town) plays, moving episode-by-episode, rather than cycle-by-cycle in order to demonstrate "the manner in which the same subject was treated in different parts of the kingdom [and]... such alterations as appear to have taken place at various dates" (Collier II:154). Most of this synopsis was simply comparative plot summary, but he took special notice of the Widkirk (Wakefield) Second Shepherd's Play, which he identified as "the most singular piece in the whole collection, not a religious play, but literally a farce." (Collier II:180) After quoting it at length, he concluded that "something very like broad comedy, as a dramatic representation, is a great deal older than it has ever been supposed to be." (Collier II:188) Collier passed through the Passion sequences with very little commentary, noting only that "the nailing upon and raising of the Cross is a tedious process" (Collier II:206), and noted that the damned Pope of the Chester De Judicio Extremo is "a remarkable character in a Roman Catholic Miracle-play." (Collier II:225) He provided a similar kind of plot summary for the St. Paul and Mary Magdalene plays of the Digby MS 133, noting briefly the existence of the Slaughter of the Innocents and the fragment of Wisdom which are also contained in that MS. He saw the ending of performance of the Miracle-plays as a result of the development of the Moral-play, despite the evidence of late performances which
he presented. (Collier II:236) He presented a story of gradual, steady development, both of form and of popularity, from a very early point to the sixteenth century. Many of his citations suggested abuses or corruptions, particularly in regard to the involvement of the clergy in staged representations. The earliest parts of the Annals section were passed over very quickly, and on the whole it functioned to provide a sense of background to the Elizabethan theatre, for which the Annals were much more detailed.

Interestingly Collier, and this work in particular, were later identified as frauds. The Dictionary of National Biography stated:

Although awkwardly arranged, this work was full of new and valuable matter. Unhappily it also contained the earliest of a long series of insidious literary frauds; but at the time no suspicion of his good faith was entertained. (349) None of his statements or quotations can be trusted without verifying, and no volume or document that has passed through his hands can be too carefully scrutinized.  

In 1835, Thomas Sharp edited the Digby "Conversion of Saul", "Mary Magdalene", "Killing of the Children of Israel", and the fragment of "Wisdom" (which is simply titled "A Morality"). An oddity of Sharp's work, which on the whole has stood the test of time better than that of most of his contemporaries, was that he visualized all staging as taking place aboard the pageant vehicle: for example, Saul apparently rides his horse down and out of a pageant wagon (!), and into the street.

Whilst Saul retires to accoutre himself for riding, a low, but ludicrous scene, takes place betwixt his servant and the "hosteler" or "stabyl-groom," to whom the former applies for a horse for Saul, who being mounted, "rydeth forth wt hys svant about the place out of the place," that is, out of the pageant and consequently in the street. (iv)

For this play, Sharp suggested that the audience would have moved together with the pageant wagon to each of the three stations indicated in the text. The staging of the play of "Mary


34Thomas Sharp, ed. Ancient Mysteries from the Digby Manuscripts (Edinburgh: Abbotsford Club, 1835)
Magdalenew was not, for the most part, discussed, although he did try to make the reference to hell fit into his conception of a wagon and a hell-mouth:

The stage mentioned above... was in the form of a tower.... It would seem... that this piece of machinery, evidently an addition to the usual pageant vehicle, continued attached to it during the performance.... [Hell] in conformity with the custom of the time, was represented by a monstrous mouth with a movable jaw... (Sharp Digby ix)

There were few critical judgements in Sharp's work. It was largely plot summary with a few hypothesized remarks on staging and, occasionally, on authorship. He made one notable critical judgement about "Wisdom":

...however much ... rendered dull and obscure by the introduction of religious dogmas, yet there are other parts that rise so vastly superior.... the genius of the writer was necessarily cramped and restrained by the allegorizing nature... through which nevertheless there occasionally breaks out natural bursts of feeling and genius. (Sharp Digby xxxii-xxxiii)

This rejection of the religious elements and the corresponding elevation of 'natural feeling' was a common critical response to the medieval drama. In accord with Collier (who was also a member of the Abbotsford Club, for whom the volume was printed), Sharp judged that "Wisdom" must be later than the more biblical Saul and Mary Magdalenew plays: "the nature of the subject and stile of composition evidently bespeak a later origin than the Mysteries which precede it." (Sharp Digby xlvii) Sharp's work was the first scholarship which focussed exclusively on the medieval drama. His editions and his work on the Coventry records opened a previously closed field; while he made few mistakes of his own, the generalizing tendency of his time and the dearth of information beyond his research tended to cause other writers to use his work as the basis of a large number of increasingly untenable hypotheses about the drama.

Collier's 1831 notice of the Towneley Second Shepherd's play brought it to attention: in 1835, the Surtees Society resolved that 500 copies of The Towneley Mysteries

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35In 1836, Collier released a privately printed edition of 25 copies, titled Five Miracle Plays or Scriptural Dramas (London: for John Payne Collier, 1836) which contained the Chester "Antichrist", Dublin "Abraham's Sacrifice", Ludus Coventriae "Marriage of the Virgin", Towneley "Adoration of the Shepherds" (the second Shepherds' play), and (MS
be printed, and in 1836, this volume, only the third in their series, was released. The introduction suggested that the earliest ownership and composition of the MS were connected with the cell of Augustinian canons at Woodkirk, tracing language traits in some of the plays "especially the Secunda Pastorum" to the West Riding of Yorkshire (Towneley 1836 xi) and topographical allusions in this play to Wakefield. The writer refrained from any further hypothesizing, saying:

On the general question of these Mysteries, and the important link which they constitute between the theatrical representations of antient and modern times, and the light which they throw upon the manners and customs and religious opinions of their period, the reader is referred to the publications of Mr. Sharp, Mr. Markland, and Mr. Collier. (Towneley 1836 xi)

This edition added a new kind of scholarship to the field; one which simply illuminated the manuscript, its language, and its provenance. There was no critical commentary on the plays, no generalizing upon their place in English literature.

This approach was limited to formal textual editions; the first anthology of medieval plays indulged lavishly in speculation. William Marriott compiled most of the previously published plays into A Collection of English Miracle Plays or Mysteries. The volume contained from Chester, Markland's "Deluge" and Collier's "Antichrist"; from 'Coventry', Hone's "Joseph's Jealousy" and "Trial of Mary and Joseph" and Sharp's "Pageant of Shearmen and Tailors"; from Towneley, the Surtees Society's "Pharao", "Pastores" (second Shepherds' play), "Crucifixio", "Extractio animarum ad inferno", and "Juditium"; from

Harl. 2253) "Harrowing of Hell".

36James Raine or J. Hunter ed. The Towneley Mysteries (London: J.B. Nichols and Son for the Surtees Society, 1836) George Pollard, who re-edited the plays in 1897, identified the editor of this volume as either James Raine, the Society’s secretary, or J. Hunter. There is no further evidence to confirm either.

37Marriott, William A Collection of English Miracle Plays or Mysteries: Containing Ten Dramas from the Chester, Coventry and Towneley, Series, with Two of Latter Date. To Which is Prefixed An Historical View of This Description of Plays. (Basel: Schweighauser & Co., and Paris: Brockhouse and Avenarius, 1838)
Sharp, the "Candlemas Day" and from Dodsley\textsuperscript{38}, John Bale's "God's Promises". The volume was intended as a lecture-book, and introduced itself with the premise that the study of medieval plays was good, because

the early Miracle plays afford one of the best illustrations of the manners and customs of our forefathers. Moreover, we learn from the opinions of our forefathers on various subjects, their manner of thinking, and are perhaps better enabled to judge the state of the civilisation in which they were, than from other sources. (Marriott vi)

Discarding Warton's theory of origins, which placed the beginnings of medieval religious drama in clerical jealousy somewhere in the eighth century, Marriott placed them in the first centuries of the Christian era, arguing that biblical plays were in existence continuously thereafter, the earliest English versions being translations from French. He stated authoritatively that miracle plays were performed in Chester around 1268, and that "Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the religious ceremony of the Corpus Christi Play was instituted at York" (Marriott xiii)\textsuperscript{39}. Like Warton, he was concerned with the propriety, or apparent lack thereof, that his medieval ancestors seemed to display in their tastes in drama:

We meet often with the character of God in these dramas, and this, according to our ideas, appears to be highly improper and even irreverent... our forefathers could have seen no great impropriety in it, or they would not have admitted it... these plays were generally accustomed to be performed every year, so that persons accustomed to behold them every year from their earliest infancy, did not perceive those improprieties... (Marriott lvi-lvii)

His explanation of the presence of apocryphal materials in the plays was similar to Hone's:

There can be little doubt that the Apocrypha was chosen by the writers of these plays as best suited to the barbarous ages in which they appeared, from

\textsuperscript{38}Dodsley, R. \textit{A Select Collection of Old Plays} (London, 1744; reprinted 1780, 1825.) Vol. 1, 1-37.

\textsuperscript{39}Although he quoted the passages from Drake in full immediately thereafter, no such date is provided in that text. Perhaps he was working from the papal institution of the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1264.
its containing more improbabilities and absurdities. (Marriott lxi)\(^40\)

It is interesting to note that although Markland had distinguished the Coventry Shearmen and Tailor's pageant from those plays in the Ludus Coventriae MS, and in fact cast some doubt on that MS's connection with Coventry at all, Marriott joined the two under the heading of Coventry without any discussion. Marriott's work provided nothing that was new in either texts or ideas but it functioned to solidify belief in the hypothetical origin of English drama, to provide the beginnings of a "canon" and to keep Warton's ideas, now sixty years old, still current and authoritative.

In 1838, Thomas Wright edited a volume of continental Latin plays and poetry titled Early Mysteries and Other Latin Poems of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries\(^41\). Although only slightly related to the subject of the development of criticism of medieval English drama, this volume demonstrates the growth of interest in the subject in general. It came as a result of the view that the English plays were an outgrowth of liturgical plays.

These [Latin] dramas are... exceedingly valuable illustrations of the history of the stage at that remote period. They afford us by far the earliest specimen of a series of consequent plays founded on subjects of Scripture history, and are doubtlessly the first draughts of what afterwards produced such collections as the Towneley, Coventry and Chester Mysteries. (Wright, Early Mysteries, vii)

Wright went on in 1843 and 1847 to produce an edition of the Chester Mysteries, which is discussed below.

Early literature research was now becoming fashionable in certain circles\(^42\). The activities of Furnivall, Halliwell-Phillips, Wright and other scholars of the early drama widened the canon of English literature by making the texts available; Furnivall in particular

\(^40\)Marriott's next topic was nudity in the Chester Adam and Eve play; it would appear that he was copying Warton's thoughts in precisely the order in which he found them.

\(^41\)Thomas Wright Early Mysteries and Other Latin Poems of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries (London: Nichols & Son 1838)

\(^42\)The Camden Society was established in 1838; the Percy Society in 1841; the Shakespeare Society in 1841.
made medieval studies an attractive avenue of study for many younger scholars by means of his "generous concern for the lives of ordinary people"43 (Faulkner 157). As well as founding the Early English Text Society, which published first editions of most of the Middle English drama (and a vast number of other works in Middle English), Furnivall also started the Chaucer, New Shakspere, Browning, and Ballad Societies and was instrumental in getting the immense project of the Oxford English Dictionary started.44 Furnivall drew crowds of people into his ventures, bringing early English literature to them as a form of missionary work in order to improve their intellectual lives and moral welfare.

the buoyant fervour and piety with which he had lived the evangelical life was now redirected with fresh, optimistic and compensatory energy to more secular ends: the celebration and reclamation of the golden ages of England peopled with noble, heroic ancestors.45

In 1841, James Orchard Halliwell-Phillips produced Ludus Coventriæ: A Collection of Mysteries Formerly Presented at Coventry on the Feast of Corpus Christi46 for the Shakespeare Society.47 Halliwell-Phillips was an energetic collector of early documents and manuscripts whose work eventually focussed exclusively on Shakespeare's biography. In his introduction, he dealt lightly with the uncertainty of the plays' connection to Coventry, saying


47Thomas Wright and John Payne Collier were also members of the Shakespeare Society at this point.
If then we have not complete and absolute evidence that Ludus Coventriae is not the proper title of these Mysteries, yet the probabilities are greatly in favour of the correctness of this appellation, and no urgent reasons have been given for any different conclusion. (Halliwell-Phillips, Coventry viii)

He noted that "Mr. Sharp has also printed a Coventry play of a later date, which does not contain [this] dialectical peculiarity" (Halliwell-Phillips, Coventry ix), but never questioned the by-now solid assumption that these plays were performed by the Grey Friars in Coventry. He also attempted to sort out the discrepancies in the numbering of the plays which the MS contained by reorganizing the division points between plays, which resulted in "the opinion that there is more discrepancy between the Proclamation and the compilation as we have it than is in fact the case." (Block, xxx) Whether this effect was the intended purpose of his reorganization is impossible to demonstrate; but he did go on to argue:

If the opinion I have formed of their locality be correct, I can account for this [the Proclamation "in N. towne"] by supposing that the prologues belong to another series of plays, or that these mysteries were occasionally performed at other places. The summaries of the pageants, as given in the Prologue, are often confusionally numbered; and it must be confessed that the conclusion would suit a company of strolling players much better than the venerable order of the Grey Friars. (Halliwell-Phillips, Coventry xi)

In other words, by exacerbating the confusion in numbering, he could separate the Prologue, leaving the plays themselves still safely ensconced with the Grey Friars at Coventry. The effect of his work on this MS was less to hold the plays up to laughter from the perspective of rational Protestantism than to forcibly smooth out their incongruities in order to make them comprehensible. His notes offered many sources and analogies to references in the text, and for, the first time since Sharp, the plays began to look fascinating, rather than tedious or obscure or improper. As he put it, they were

some of the most curious and valuable relics of bygone times; not merely as important records of our stage, but also as illustrating, in a very interesting manner, the customs, language and manners of the periods to which they belong. (Halliwell-Phillips, Coventry i)

In 1843, Robert Davies published Extracts from the Municipal Records of the City
of York during the Reigns of Edward IV, Edward V and Richard III. Davies was formerly the Town Clerk of the City of York and was led by a government commission inquiry into the state of the Corporation of the City of York into an interest in the city's documents. The book was his first publication, and while it contained the records already cited by Drake in the Eboracum, it also contained many more which were not, both in the language of the originals and in translation, along with copious notes and remarks. Although his interest was clearly turned toward the movements of the royalty and the nobility, his book provided a selection of the civic records relating to the Corpus Christi play: details were suddenly much more available. At this point, only the York Scriveners' play was known to have survived. Davies approached the medieval plays in York as an interesting appendix to the political history of the city. He relied heavily upon previously published sources about the drama, especially Sharp, probably because their civic records-based approaches were so similar. His analysis of the records was a narrative of growing civic unruliness which peaked with the visit of Friar William Melton:

In 1417..., by thus removing a judicious restriction, it is highly probable that encouragement was given to the irregularities which at this period had become prevalent in the city during the celebration of the festival, and a few years afterwards were so gross as to call for ecclesiastical interference and censure. (Davies 241-242)

His analysis differentiated the Corpus Christi procession from the play itself, identified the Guild of Corpus Christi and the Creed play, and provided an account of the end of the plays which was based on the political shifts of the sixteenth century, rather than on the idea that their literary form had been superseded by the superior form of the morality play or the Elizabethan theatre.

It was unquestionably, with the utmost reluctance, and after a protracted

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49It was published by Croft in Excerpta Antiqua. (York: 1791); Halliwell-Phillips included it in the privately published Yorkshire Anthology (London, 1851, twenty-five copies) 198-204; and it appeared again in Collier's Camden Miscellany. (London: J.B. Nichols and Sons, 1859) v.4, article 3.
struggle, that the citizens of York were ultimately constrained to relinquish the celebration of the Corpus Christi festival, which during nearly three centuries they had regarded as the great holiday of the year, - the day on which their "pageants of delight were played." But the time had at length arrived when these representations, in which the most sacred topics were treated with unbecoming familiarity, were no longer necessary as vehicles of instruction, and had become justly offensive to the taste and feelings of the more enlightened classes of the community. (Davies 278-279)

Davies' work relied heavily on that of Collier and Sharp for information which did not come from the York records. When not speaking from personal research, he tended to incorporate the opinions and contradictions of the scholars who preceded him. Thus, although the plays were 'justly offensive', he could also say of the Scriveners' Play, the only one he had read:

If it contain but a slender portion of poetic beauty, we shall search in vain for a single passage of either ribaldry or blasphemy. The solemn and touching incident which it represents is treated with a sober devotional feeling. (Davies 239)

Davies' work added details about the guilds and demonstrated that the plays were rarely subjected to ecclesiastical control or interference before the Reformation. His scholarship moved in the direction of specific, records-based analysis, rather than generalizing, theory-based views, and, with Sharp, he seemed to work on the basis of the idea that the plays could be better understood through the contextual information provided by the civic records.

1843 also saw the release of the first volume of Thomas Wright's edition of the Chester plays for the Shakespeare Society; the second followed in 1847. Wright approached the plays for the same three reasons which had been given so often by previous editors and commentators:

The Mysteries and Miracle Plays of the middle ages possess an interest not only as illustrating the history of the stage in its infancy, but as pictures of the manners and condition of our forefathers, and also as indicating the quantity and peculiar character of the religious knowledge inculcated into the populace in Catholic times. (Wright Chester v)

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Although Wright discarded the story of the connection of the Chester plays to John Arneway and Ranulph Higden as "too improbable to deserve our serious consideration" (Wright *Chester* xvii), he tried to produce a generalized narrative of the development of English drama from his earlier work in the Latin plays. He was exceedingly noncommittal on the fine points of when and how outdoor staging developed:

The early religious plays, in their simpler form, were played in churches, and the scene was laid in different parts of the building... It is difficult to say at what time they began first to be acted on stages.... At a later period we find that these stages were placed upon carts. (Wright *Chester* ix)

Wright suggested that the Chester plays were, of the English plays, those most likely to be translations from French originals, but dismissed Collier's argument for a theory of direct translation. Of their composition date, he said "the original manuscript from which they were copied was of the earlier part of the fifteenth or of the end of the fourteenth century." (Wright *Chester* xvi) Wright seems to have subscribed to the theory that coarse medieval humour was added to the plays in order to hold the attention of the illiterate audience:

When these compositions were written in Latin... it was sufficient to give a few sentences of simple dialogue, and the effect was produced by the acting. But when the religious plays were written in the language of the populace, more art was employed in the construction and embellishment of the piece, and droll characters and ridiculous speeches were introduced in order to produce mirth. (Wright *Chester* xii) The gross language frequently put into the mouths of the women gives us but a mean opinion of the delicacy of the manners among the middle and lower classes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. (Wright *Chester* xiii)

This comment also suggests a distaste for the material: Noah's shrewish wife and the screaming women of the "Slaughter of the Innocents" were out of line with Victorian ideals of romantic chivalry. Wright's scholarship was, however, a vast improvement on that which preceded it. It is worth remembering that like so many other editors of literary society volumes, he worked voluntarily and without remuneration.  

51 See vol. 2, Sixth Annual Report of the Shakespeare Society, explaining the long delay between the two volumes: "The Society has never devoted any portion of its funds to the remuneration of gentlemen who have in this way given their valuable aid, and it can hardly be expected that services merely gratuitous should be performed before those from which
which were based upon the "phraseology and forms of words" (Wright Chester xvi), rather than upon the character of the alleged writer, or the lack of evidence to the contrary, and he refrained altogether from simply guessing. (xxi)

With the publication of these volumes, scholarship in early drama moved into a new phase. It appeared that all, or nearly all, of the texts had now been printed. Until the appearance of Lucy Toulmin Smith's edition of the York plays in 1885, there was an interval of history-making, in which the focus of most early drama scholarship was to explain and connect (if possible) the many bits of information which had become available in the past quarter century. The third quarter of the nineteenth century was also the time when the study of English literature was becoming an academic discipline; many comprehensive histories of English literature were written and the canon of study was established. Although little new information was released, these compendiums provide examples of critical approaches to the medieval drama during this period.

Henry Morley's English Writers was distinguished by a nationalist bias in its attempts to delineate English character:

the full mind of a nation is its literature; and we may be very sure that to a true history of the literature of any country must belong a distinct recognition of the national character that underlies it, gives coherence to it all, and throughout marks with strength its individuality. (Morley 1) The student of English literature then, should look for the characteristic mind of the nation.... speaking at divers times, but always straight from English lips to English ears. (Morley 5)

Morley found that the English mind, as exhibited in English literature beyond practical social demands was "freely open to religious influence, and was as practical then as it is now"(Morley 6); characterized by "the determined protest against wrong which forms the bone and marrow of our literature" (Morley 8); steady, spiritual, adaptive to its circumstances, and yet clear-sighted and independent in its moral views. Morley's playful

emoluments are derived."

metaphors anthropomorphized both the literature and the language: "Broadchested English has allowed its lungs free play, and will be strapped up in the leather covering of no man's dictionary" (Morley 54); he examined the influence of other literatures, particularly those of France and Italy, in order to discern what was uniquely English.

Despite Wright's recently published scepticism, Morley called the Chester plays "The oldest series of English Mysteries.... the plays acted in Chester at Whitsuntide." (Morley v.2 pt. 1 349) He unquestioningly reproduced the Higden/Armeway story as fact and characterized the plays as tragic. The Wakefield Second Shepherds' play was the most interesting of all Miracle Plays that have come down to us. Omit the angels' song and the Adoration and there remains a farce with a plot. It is a rough picture of real life, no doubt, but real life mirrored in a dramatic story, a true little drama and the earliest that is to be found in our language. Its sentiments show it to be the work of a man whose sympathies were strongly with the people. (Morley v.2, pt.1, 361-362)

Morley provided another critical reason to examine the medieval drama: the political identification with 'the people'. He called it "for about three centuries... one of the liveliest expressions of a main part of the mind of the English people." (Morley v.2, pt.1, 367) What earlier writers had termed 'the manners of our forefathers' was now becoming refocussed in a way that distinguished the sober and devotional shows of 'the people' from the entertainments of the court. 'The people' were the democratic representatives of the new group of middle-class scholars who were making the study of English literature into an academic discipline.54

Lucy Toulmin Smith's first publication was the completion in 1870 of her father's work on the Early English Text Society edition of English Gilds55. In her introduction, she

53Morley was the first English critic to refer to the Passion Play at Ober Ammergau (v.2, pt.1, 346).

54See Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) chapter one for a discussion of this development.

55Smith, Toulmin, ed. English Gilds (Early English Text Society o.s. #40 Oxford University Press, 1870) Introduction and glossary by Lucy Toulmin Smith.
explained the relationship of their shared interest in the medieval gilds to the contemporary development of the trade unions, using the historical material (just as Ruskin had) as a guide to correct her own society:

In the midst of the perplexing problems presented by modern Trades-unionism, and the dangers to enterprise and manly liberty threatened by its restrictive rules, my father, who knew that Englishmen can "never appeal to their fathers in vain, when they earnestly invoke the spirit of solid freedom," saw how the ancient principle of association, more than a thousand years old, had been in use as a living practice among the common folk, that it had been "a part of the essential life of England"... the work would "by examples, give invaluable practical hints to sincere men" and workers now. (Smith Gilds xiii)

In 1870, the existence of the Ashburnham MS of the York cycle was apparently still unknown to her, for she described the play cycle which is mentioned by the Corpus Christi guild ordinances as "a dumb show of set pieces in an array of pageants" (Smith Gilds 137), and attributed the 270 pages of names of the guild's "brethren and sisteren" to "the love of show and pageant" and "a departure from the very narrow spirit of the original ordinances." (Smith Gilds 142) She criticised the ordinances for their "tedious scholastic disquisition... subtleties...[and lack of] common sense and good feeling of the laity" (Smith Gilds 140). These judgements illustrate her tendency to evaluate source texts on a scale which moved from very uncomfortable, catholic, superstitious material at its base, toward secular, naturalistic and humanist values at its pinnacle: what was perceived to be the best was that in which one's reflection as a sensible Anglican was most clearly visible. The Church (and therefore scholasticism) was bad; the common man, his experiences as an individual and his "natural" desire to form groups for mutual help were good. The medieval drama therefore occupied a tenuous position: although it was an example of cooperative social organization, and could often be read as a provider of examples of everyday experience, it also carried the stigma of Catholicism, and was criticised for the presence of such 'tedious scholastic disquisitions'.
condemned the plays for their attempt to "realize" what to him were matters of abstracted faith:

These plays... abound in evidence of the rudely material conceptions of the age in which they were produced. Such above all is to be found in the repulsive reproduction in action of an extraordinary legend in the [N-Town] Salutation and Resurrection. Compared with such instances of a tendency to reduce every mystery of the faith to a realized actuality, all mere anachronisms or oddities of ignorance are insignificant. These mysteries teach, in their way, the lesson which the strange oaths of the Middle Ages teach in another, that a constant familiarity with the bodily presentment of sacred persons and things bred a material grossness in the whole aesthetical atmosphere of the people. What seems to us so profane in the readiness of our forefathers to allow the highest conceptions of religion to be associated with the crudest attempts at reproducing them in bodily form, was the result of an aesthetic, rather than a religious deficiency. (Ward History of English Literature v.1, 44)

Ward's critique clarified the discomfort with what earlier critics had often classed as "impropriety". Ward had seen the performance at Oberammergau, and his estimation of the Christ in this "material" presentation was "beyond praise, and on the level of really high art". (Ward History of English Literature v.1, 49) This Protestant discomfort with the Catholic materiality embodied by the sacrament which Corpus Christi celebrated had a profound effect on the way the plays were treated, both critically and to an even greater extent, in performance.


One effect of the Passion Play on Englishmen was to make them even more ashamed of the religious drama of their own country. Against the solemnity and calm grandeur of the Oberammergau play, they set the 'vulgar, profane, indecent and horrifying incidents' of the English miracles, with their mixture of the sacred and the profane, their hoth-potch of high tragedy and low comedy, and their primitive superstitions. (40)
Furnivall's 1882 introduction to the Digby Plays\(^5\) demonstrated this bias, and it also described the Victorian solution to the problem: Shakespeare.

But to every play-goer and every student of the drama all the old Mysteries have an interest independent of their literary merit. They show him the stories and scenes in which his forefathers before and up to Shakespeare's time were content to find edification and amusement. They prove to him that these old plays were but parts of the Romish Church service, developd and taken out into the streets. They give him the origin of that mixture of comedy in deepest tragedy, and of tragedy in highest comedy, nay in roaring farce, which is a leading note of Shakespeare's drama, and which so shocks the classicist critics of Romanticism. And if these Digby Mysteries, being poorer than the Towneley, point to the decay of the old religious drama in England, the student sees in that only the greater need for Shakespeare to arise, replace the old Religionism with the new Humanity, and take as his themes the loves, fears, hates, ambitions of men, the World and its Ruler, instead of Judeaica and its King. (Furnivall Digby viii)

Despite the opening sentence of this quotation, Furnivall never discussed the literary merit of these plays. His interest in them was purely drawn from the context of their relationship with Shakespeare's work. He demonstrated again the now-standard appraisal of the Towneley plays: the Second Shepherd's Play appeared less devotional for its farcical content; it was therefore more like "literature" and superior; by extension, the entire MS seemed to benefit.

The existence of the MS of the York plays was known to some extent for quite a while before its publication.\(^6\) In 1843, Wright mentioned what turned out to be the York plays: "I think it probable also that other sets exist: one, said to be the oldest yet known, was brought to light at the Strawberry Hill sale, and it is sincerely to be hoped that it will be published." (Wright Chester 1) A.C. Cawley credited Sir Frederick Madden, head of the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum from 1837-1866, with the discovery in

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\(^5\)F.J. Furnivall, ed. The Digby Plays (Early English Text Society e.s. #70 Oxford University Press, 1882, reissued 1896) This text was transcribed by Karl Marx's daughter, Eleanor.

1842-1844 that this manuscript was that of the plays performed in York. Madden's journals related how, when in 1844 the MS became available, a bookseller named Rodd had planned to purchase it, have Madden edit it and then resell it to the British Museum, but was out-bid by Thorpe, an agent of the fourth Earl of Ashburnham:

By this arrangement, the MS will be secured to the Museum at a moderate price, Rodd will have the benefit and merit of the publication, Mr. Halliwell will be kept in the background, and I shall put 100£ in my pocket; besides obtaining the credit of Editor of a volume anxiously looked-for. This was our well-concocted (as we thought) and judicious plan, but the result was fatal to our hopes.... 305.0.0£!!! Purchased by Thorpe on commission, against Rodd and Sir F.M...... I am exceedingly mortified at this unlooked-for interference.... I trust the owner will not lock it up in imitation of Mr. Bright. (Cawley, "Thoresby and Later Owners..." p.84)

As it turned out, the fourth Earl of Ashburnham bought the MS privately in 1847 for 350£ and then did lock it up. Although its existence was known to a few scholars, it was completely unavailable for about the next forty years. In 1860, Halliwell-Phillips mentioned it briefly in his Dictionary of Old English Plays in Print or in Manuscript as "a collection of Old English mysteries exhibited by the incorporated trades of the City of York on the festival of Corpus Christi, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries", noting only that "A MS. copy of them, transcribed in the year 1553, is in the possession of Lord Ashburnham", and referring the reader back to Thoresby's Ducatus Leodiensis. In 1871, Hazlitt lamented that they

have had a most unfortunate destiny in being secreted by successive owners. It is to be regretted that they were not secured, when they occurred for sale about twenty years ago, for the national library, since only one of the York series, the Scriveners' play, exists in a duplicate copy.  

60Bodleian Library MSS Eng. hist. c. 155 (1842) and c. 157 (1844); extracts pertaining to the York MS are published in Cawley's article.


The fourth Earl of Ashburnham, who was "notorious for denying scholars access to his manuscripts" (Cawley Thoresby 89) died in 1878. It was the fifth Earl of Ashburnham who finally gave Lucy Toulmin Smith permission to edit the MS, which eventually came into the Museum's possession in 1899 for 121£. Cawley explained the rise in its value between 1764 (1.1£) and 1844 (305£) as a result of the rise in appreciation of "Gothic poetry" during the first four decades of the nineteenth century: "by 1844 the only Corpus Christi cycle not yet published, as a whole or in part, was the manuscript volume of the York plays." (Cawley Thoresby 80) Perhaps the later fall in its value was related to the fact that all of the other plays had been edited forty years ago, and the "gothic" was somewhat less fashionable.

The process through which Lucy Toulmin Smith secured permission to edit the Ashburnham MS of the York cycle remains obscure, and the woman herself is enigmatic. Lucy Toulmin Smith (1838-1911) was born in Boston Mass., while her father, Joshua, resided in America between 1837-42. She apparently never married. Her bibliography reveals that after completing her father's work, she continued to edit medieval manuscripts and demonstrates that she worked with Furnivall for several years and shared his enthusiasm for the study of English as a form of self-improvement. From 1894 until her death in 1911

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63See John Foster Kirk A Supplement to Allibone's Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors (Philedelphia: J. Lippincott & Co., 1902) II: 1361.

64English Gilds (intro and glossary) Early English Texts Society, 1870
The Maire of Bristoweis Kalendar ed. Camden Society, 1872
Shakespeare's Centurie of Praye: Being Materials for a history of opinion on Shakespeare and his works by C.M. Ingleby; (2nd edition revised and enlarged by Lucy Tounmin Smith) London: New Shakespeare Society, 1879, 4:2,3
Les Contes Moralises de Nicole Bozon ed. with Paul Meyer. Paris: Didot, 1889
English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages by J.J. Jusserand (trans. and added about a third of new material) London: T.F. Unwin, 1892
at the age of 73, she was the Librarian of Manchester College, Oxford. Her obituary lamented that "Her services to English scholarship and literature were altogether out of proportion to her notoriety", which is still frustratingly the case.

In 1882, a press release in *The Academy* announced that the MS would be edited by Lucy Toulmin Smith and outlined its most interesting features: five plays in common with the Towneley series, and the presence of music. The connection to the Towneley plays and the long delay in publication made the edition something of an event. The Towneley plays had long been identified as the 'best' of the medieval biblical drama, mainly due to the comic appeal of the Second Shepherds' Play; here at last was a possible clue to their authorship.

The York collection being perfect, it may be expected that it will serve to correct the Towneley set - many of the plays in which are imperfect... - as well as to supply useful variations in readings for the parallel plays. (anon. *Academy* 10)

The York plays did not emerge into a vacuum; medieval biblical plays were already a somewhat known quantity, and their relationship with the Towneley plays provided immediate value and a direction in which scholarship could move.

Lucy Toulmin Smith's *editio princeps* was a good one: it was republished in 1963, remained the standard until Richard Beadle's in 1982, and is still used as a teaching edition. Her scholarship, like that of Sharp and Wright and Davies, was unobtrusive and specific, reliant on the civic documents and disinclined to participate in contentious debates about the origins of drama. She said "It would be out of place here to enter into any disquisition on the history or origin of the religious drama, even in England, which have been treated by various writers" (Smith xlii), referring the reader to Collier, Ward, Warton, Wright, Marriott,

65 *Times*, Thursday December 21, 1911, 11c.


Sharp, and Halliwell-Phillips. She presented the plays as not only superior to the other medieval biblical plays, but also to much of the poetry of their time, the work of a single author. They were "the most complete English collection" (Smith xlili), "more direct and simple" (Smith xlvi), "more likely [than Towneley] to be the original source" (Smith xlvi); they "compare favourably in diction, and certainly so in verse, with the better specimens of Middle English Northern poetry" (Smith l); "Observant of human nature and sympathetic... the author had considerable play... he displayed not a little dramatic power in the arrangement of scenes" (Smith lv). This was a fundamental shift in approach to the plays. Although she could still see "the value of the religious plays and players in leading up to what is called 'the regular drama'"; her focus was turned toward the idea of value. Her praise for the text was designed to dismiss the "fragmentary treatment" (Smith xliii), "hard words" (Smith l) and "ignorant sneers" (Smith lv) of previous scholarship by demonstrating that these plays were "free from much of the coarse jocularity and popular incident", "cast in a poetic form with skill and power of a higher level" (Smith xlv), and of "native growth", unlikely to have been "translated or introduced from France" (Smith l). This chauvinistic preference for the homegrown forms also showed in her description of the verse:

the unknown author, whoever he was, possessed much skill in versification at that period when the old alliteration of the English, altered though it were from its earliest forms, was still popular, yet when the poet had found the charms of rime, and the delights of French verse allured him to take on new shackles while casting off the old. (Smith xlv)

Her description presented the plays as worthy by making them as English, as civic, and as little controlled by the Catholic church as possible; a necessary response to earlier critiques which dismissed medieval biblical drama for its possible connections to the church and France.

The aspect of the plays' materiality provoked fascination and discomfort; while "the excellent representation of a heavy manual job by a set of rough workmen in the Crucifixion" was a "touch of current life" (Smith lvii), its "too-great realism, the rearing of the cross and hammering of wedges and mortices" had to be understood in the context of Roman Catholic rites and processions in Malta (Smith xlix). This ambivalence was a new step toward
understanding the plays, in contrast with Ward's violent dismissal of Catholic materiality.

As her previous work on *English Guilds* demonstrated, she had a popular, democratic interest in the lives of common people in the middle ages. One of the values of the text was its ability to connect her to the experiences of these people. The plays were "a part of the life of the people" (Smith xlIII). She says "We can picture the people expectant, listening with eyes and ears for the entry and the rant of the hero of the piece" (Smith lvi); "touches of current life and usage here and there stand out amid the ancient story.... Note too the sturdy common morality that will not tell a lie" (Smith lvii); "The picture of these good folks up at half past four on a summer morning ready to act their parts one after another reminds us of Ober-Ammergau, in strong contrast to the habits of the modern stage." (Smith xxxiv) It is "an interesting relic of our early literature and social life"; even the process of making the edition itself had been

> animated by the true gild-spirit of mutual help; if the reader is enabled by these pages to call up any life-picture of the art and literature so essentially a product of the people, maintained by means of the old English gild-spirit, to these modern brethren let him give honour due. (Smith lx)

Lucy Toulmin Smith spoke as a part of the larger movement which developed the study of English literature as a social mission, "the poor man's Classics" with its emphasis on "solidarity between the social classes, the cultivation of 'larger sympathies', the installation of national pride and the transmission of moral virtues." (Eagleton 27) She was interested in the plays more for their connection with the guilds than for their linguistic or religious content and her edition provided abundant evidence of her own populist political ideology. Further scholarly endeavors of this sort came in the form of the publication of the records of the City and guilds of York. Through this edition, the York cycle entered and remained for decades in the canon of medieval drama as a primary exemplar of Northern poetic forms, popular sincere religious material and democratic cooperation.
Chapter Two

The Search for the Source: Evolution and Early York Cycle Scholarship

Between 1885, when Lucy Toulmin Smith's edition of the York plays was published and 1933, when Karl Young's *The Drama of the Medieval Church* appeared, the field of medieval drama was established as an area of academic literary study. The most obvious and enduring legacy of the period is Darwin's theory of the evolution of species. Nearly all of the scholarly work of the early twentieth century bears its stamp in one way or another; the aspects of the York plays which were the most heavily studied were studied because they lay at critical points in the literary application of this theory. Although it is difficult and dangerous to generalize, and the use of a chronological arrangement almost invariably suggests some progressivist assumptions, the materials of this chapter are arranged chronologically in order to demonstrate not only development, but also the sense of many voices participating concurrently in interlinked discourses. Personalities emerged and vanished, or became enshrined; tentatively offered theory became assumption and then dogma; historical developments were reflected in scholarly nationalism. Early York cycle scholarship witnessed the origins of records research, of discourse on "realism" and comedy, of textual relations between the York and Towneley plays, and primarily, of discourse on the historical development of the text of the York plays. Most studies were motivated by the search for sources, for beginnings. These were (in various combinations) the liturgical tropes, vernacular prose accounts like the Gospel of Nicodemus, a lost "parent" cycle, even (rather flakily argued) the Chester cycle, or the Byzantine heritage of the ancient Greek dramatic tradition (!) Obviously, the quality and impact of studies from this time varied a great deal, as they still do.

Initially, the edition was under-reviewed; perhaps its appearance forty years after the rest of the cycles was somewhat anticlimactic. The first response to the new edition was an anonymous and uncritical review in *The Spectator* which called it

a handsome octavo volume, with a most valuable contribution to English literature... It is impossible to read any page of the learned introduction, extending over some seventy pages without being impressed with the very
high qualifications that the editor has brought to the formidable task, and the thoroughness and zeal with which she has applied them. The work will doubtless become the standard edition of the York Miracle Plays.

The next review was somewhat more specific. Joseph Hall, of the Manchester School, thought the text philologically important because "it affords abundant and valuable illustration of the Northern dialect in the fifteenth century." (Hall 448) Beyond his praise for the text, he added a number of suggestions, the most significant of which was the question of how the texts of the five matching Towneley plays were temporally related to those of the York cycle. While Lucy Toulmin Smith had suggested that the Towneley plays were borrowed from the York, Hall dissented:

...these plays in the York version are more alliterative than the Towneley ones.... Now, as "the law of progress in alliterative poetry is from lines cast in a loose mould to lines cast in a strict one" (Skeat, preface to Joseph of Arimathie, p. X) this would lead us to infer that the York plays in their present shape are later than the corresponding Towneley ones. (Hall 449)

Hall also questioned the theory that the plays were all written by the same author, and included a section of textual emendations of "the often easy corrections which will turn nonsense into sense." (Hall 450) During the next few years, a series of German scholars added their emendations to the text, based on metrical variances, rhyme patterns, and often simple clarifications of meaning. This textual interest in Middle English etymology and

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3I have not consulted these articles. In his edition, (p.39,40,44) Beadle described them as follows: Kamann, Über Quellen und Sprache der York Plays (1887), section on sources also appeared in Anglia 10 (1888) 198-226; Holthausen, Archiv 75 (1890) 425-428 and 76 (1891) 280-282 - language, apocryphal and legendary sources; Köbling Englische Studien 20 (1895); Hohlfeld Anglia 11 (1889) - versification; Herrrich, Studien zu den York Plays (1886) - supplementary comments on language; Holthausen and Köbling - emendations made on purely metrical grounds which are generally unacceptable, see K. Luick "Zur Textkritik der Spiele von York" Anglia 22 (1899) 384-391. A spot check of five cases revealed none in which Beadle accepted Hall's reading.
meter originated in the immense project of the New English Dictionary⁴.

In 1890, Alfred W. Pollard published a popular and long-lived anthology of medieval plays⁵ which defined the place of the plays in dramatic history. Pollard believed that there was no connection between the classical drama of Greece and Rome and the European dramatic tradition, between "the names of Aeschylus and Shakespeare." He argued that "the [Roman] stage was something too vile and horrible for any attempt to Christianize it." (Pollard xi) Pollard saw the beginnings of European drama in the tropes of the liturgy, and identified the space into which the "missing link" of the theory fitted:

During these two centuries [late 12th - late 14th] a great change had been wrought in the plays and the manner of their performance, with a gradual evolution of which we are only imperfectly acquainted.... Gradually, the players left the Church and its precincts and performed in any convenient open spaces about the town.... No English play which has been preserved to us contains any mark of its representation by clerical actors. (Pollard xxiii-xv)

Darwin's theory of evolution, and the professionalization of studies in English literature brought about a great desire to understand the texts of the plays "scientifically"; to decipher their etymological and metrical codes in order to explain their evolution. As the theory of evolution was understood progressively, so too was its literary analogy: forms developed from primitive to complex, from lower to higher. Literary Darwinism justified a canon which favoured Shakespeare above all else and absolutized the constructed valuations of the time. Thus Pollard called for a study which would devote attention to the relations of the different cycles to each other, and of the different parts of the same cycle to the whole.... Each cycle as it has come down to us must be regarded as an organic growth rather than as the work of a single author. (Pollard xxx) [italics mine]

Pollard took York to be the "standard of comparison" (Pollard xxx), and hypothesized that

⁴see Elizabeth Murray Caught in a Web of Words (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1970). Lucy Toulmin Smith thanked J.A.H. Murray in her edition "for valuable assistance with the Glossary as well as other acts of friendship." (Smith York lx)

⁵Alfred W. Pollard, ed. English Miracle Plays, Moralities and Interludes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890) This anthology included the York Barkers' Play of the Creation and Fall and provided samples from each of the cycles up to the point of the Annunciation.
"the monkish compiler of the Towneley, or Woodkirk cycle, borrowed from a cycle now lost, which used to be performed at Wakefield"; or that "the cycle is a composite one" (Pollard xxxvi). He found in both York and Towneley "vigour and originality... little pathos, but much humour... especially rich in those interpolations on the scripture narratives, in which the dramatists felt themselves freed." (Pollard xxxvi) His anthology included the York Barkers' Play of the Creation and Fall, in which he found "dramatic vigour,... and a certain homely grandeur of style." (Pollard, 177) The evolutionary metaphor left Pollard with the self-contradictory necessity of emphasizing the primitive and yet promising qualities of the text. The use of vigour suggested a form of life pulsing in its words; the word appeared frequently in treatments which were influenced by the evolutionary approach.

The first major English-language study of the English mystery plays was Charles Davidson's Ph.D. thesis6. Davidson synthesized the work of the German philologists, especially Hohlfeld7 in developing his thesis that the various strata of revisions in the York and Towneley cycles could be separated from one another by prosodic analysis, and specifically by tracking the use of a stanzaic form which he identified as the "Northern septenar stanza"; thus the existing texts could be dissected to provide the narrative of their own evolution.

The metrical structure they could reduce to ruins, but could not destroy beyond the possibility of restoration. If, therefore, the individuality, locality and relative date of stanzaic structures were once established, a sure key would be placed in the hands of the investigator, through which he could read the secrets of the cycles. (Davidson Studies 173)

For Davidson, the "sure key" took the following form:

this stanza passed through well-defined phases, of which one phase at a time dominated the writers of its day. Since the different life stages of the stanza are found in the present York cycle, it becomes possible to date the plays

6Charles Davidson, Studies in the English Mystery Plays Ph.D. Yale University 1892; published in Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences 9 (October 1892) 125-297.

relatively to each other by their stanzaic structure. (Davidson Studies 137)

By identifying the presence of the Northern septenar, Davidson concluded:

1. That there was a parent cycle of plays at York.
2. That Wakefield and True Coventry borrowed certain plays from this cycle.
3. That this cycle was the work of one author. (Davidson Studies 138)

Having identified the parent cycle, “the connections between the four cycles now reveal themselves, and the commanding position of the York plays can no longer be questioned.” (Davidson Studies 173) The parent cycle was the hypothetical “missing link” which filled the temporal gap between the liturgical Latin plays and the extant vernacular texts; a reconstructed, purified, authorial Ur-text of the vernacular plays. Davidson's work was groundbreaking and extremely influential. His readings of the texts were impressively thorough; the York plays, formerly an obscure area suited only for antiquarians and philologists became a viable and nearly untouched field for academic study by students of English literature. Having been provided with a "key" to the "secrets of the cycles", other academics, particularly Americans like Davidson, produced further studies on this model, and much of the early twentieth-century discourse about the York plays became heavily dominated by prosodic analysis and discussions of the inter-relationships of the cycles, particularly of York and Towneley.

In 1895, H.E. Coblentz, one of Davidson's students, published a set of emendations.

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8Davidson's parent cycle contained the following: York II (Creation, to the fifth day), VII (Building of the Ark), IX (Noah, his wife, the Flood, its waning), X (Abraham's sacrifice), XI (Departure of the Israelites, Ten Plagues, Red Sea), XII (Annunciation and Prologue), XV (Angels and Shepherds - 1st 3 stanzas and last 4, omitting comic episode), XVII (3 Kings - stanzas 22, 23, 24 may be reworked), XX (Doctors), XXIII (Transfiguration), XXIV (Woman taken in adultery), Wakefield XX (Conspiracio from "Cayphas" to "Tunc dicet Sanctus Johannes" Supplanted in York), York XXVII (Last Supper), XXXV (Crucifixio Christi), XXXVII (Harrowing of Hell), and XLIV (Descent of the Holy Spirit).

and an index to the rhymes of the "parent cycle". His work "was compiled with the intention of contributing toward the fuller scientific study of the period" (Coblentz "Rime-Index" 487; italics mine). His process of "correction" was as follows:

The errors are of various kinds; errors of insertion, transposition, substitution, partial alteration and scribal errors. The scribal errors are both dialectal and due to carelessness. Of the latter, errors of carelessness, nothing need be said, but the dialectal errors are quite important. The plays were northern in their origin, while the scribes were often of southern birth and education. It was most natural therefore, that a southern scribe in copying a manuscript of a play should often substitute southern forms and spellings for the old and correct northern forms and spellings.

Errors arising from substitution and partial alteration are also important. The scribes, whenever the text did not suit their taste, took the liberty to change the verse or rime to their idea of correct verse or rime. Often whole stanzas and verses are entirely or partially re-arranged, or entirely new stanzas and verses are substituted. These can generally be detected by a change from the normal four-stressed and three-stressed verses, but when the rime only has been altered, it is more difficult to find the original rime-word. They may be found sometimes by a comparison with the Woodkirk cycle, which often retains the old northern form, but more often by comparing the rime-series containing similar rimes. In all cases where emendations are suggested, I have endeavoured to give a sufficient number of other rime-series in which the same word or words occur, to verify the emendation. (Coblentz "Emendations" 77-78)

This approach to the text permitted it to be 'corrected' on the basis of sufficiently learned opinion. During the next two years, two more sets of emendations, and a brief study of the Gospel of Nicodemus as the source of the York cycle appeared. [see note 4]

Davidson's promise that the secrets of the text could be unravelled through prosodic analysis was especially attractive because the process which created the Towneley cycle, with its brilliant comedy and its matching set of plays might finally be explained. The history of the York cycle's criticism is thus linked with that of Towneley; its next major step

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came in the release of the Early English Text Society's edition of the Towneley plays. Its dedication: "To the memory of William Morris, who loved these plays", highlights the uneasy alliance in Pollard's introduction of the old antiquarian and the new scientific ways of approaching the text. Pollard followed the rule that

it was practically impossible for a play to pass from one cycle to another without showing signs of the process in marked disturbances of meter, and frequent corruptions both of sense and rhyme.... A play which is free from corruptions can hardly by any possibility have been borrowed.

By comparing the five shared plays, he concluded that the Towneley texts had been borrowed and sometimes partially rewritten from a slightly purer form of the York text than survives in the existing MS. Since this theory suggested a process of development, he went on to elaborate

three distinct stages. In the first of these we find the simple religious tone which we naturally assign to the beginning of the cyclical religious drama, the majority of them being written in one of the favourite meters of the fourteenth century romances which were already going out of fashion in Chaucer's day. In the second stage we have the introduction by some playwright, who brought the knowledge of them from elsewhere, of at least five - possibly seven or eight - of the plays which were acted at York, and the composition of some others in the same style. In the third stage a writer of some style, whose humour was unchecked by any respect for conventionality, wrote, especially for this cycle, the plays in the 9-line stanza which form its backbone, and added here and there to others. Taken together, the three stages probably cover something like half a century, ending about 1410. (Pollard xxvii-xxviii)

Pollard's stages were based as much in his perceptions about conventionality as in "scientific" analysis. Evolution must progress from simple to complex: therefore "simple", "reverent", or "unoriginal" plays were the primitive, earlier forms; "original", "bold" or "unconventional" material marked the later, more highly developed forms.

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J.M. Manly's teaching anthology, *Specimens of Pre-Shakespearian Drama*\textsuperscript{12} appeared in 1897. Beyond the title, which suggested both a scientific and evolutionary approach to the medieval plays, Manly's selections and their arrangement produced both a chronological display (liturgical tropes, cycle plays, folk plays, moralities, Tudor plays) and an "artificial cycle", which like Pollard's selections, was drawn from all the cycles. Manly saw no objection to this form of presentation:

That I have put together pageants from various sources can hardly, in view of the heterogeneous character of the cycles themselves, be a serious objection. And any one who wishes to form an idea of the distinctive characteristics of the various cycles can, with the aid of the table of contents, easily bring together the specimens of each.

The specimens which he chose from York were the Resurrection (XXXVIII) and the Last Judgement (XLVIII) plays, both of which are shared with Towneley. Manly defended these choices as follows:

A pageant dealing with the Resurrection seemed to be absolutely demanded by the importance of the Easter play in the development of the cyclic drama: the example here given from the York series will be found to contain reminiscences of the most primitive form of this strangely fated trope. No English cycle would be complete without a pageant of the Judgement, that specifically English development; and no one, I think, can fail to be impressed by the dignity and power of the specimen here presented from the York plays.

Manly presented the York cycle as primitive, dignified, and somehow specifically English. Like Pollard's, his artificial cycle excluded not only such apochryphal material as "Joseph's Troubles" and nearly all the Marian material; it contained no passion sequence! The York texts came equipped with the emendations of Hall\textsuperscript{13}, Herrtrich\textsuperscript{14}, Holthausen\textsuperscript{15} and Kölbing\textsuperscript{16}.

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\textsuperscript{12}J.M. Manly *Specimens of the Pre-Shaksperian Drama* (Boston and NY: Ginn & Co., 1897-1898; 1903-1904)

\textsuperscript{13}J. Hall reviewed the edition in *Englische Studien* 9 (1886) 448-453.

\textsuperscript{14}O. Herrtrich, *Studien zu den York Plays* (Breslau, 1886). I have not consulted this work.

\textsuperscript{15}F. Holthausen *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen* LXXXV, 411 ff; LXXVI, 280 ff; *Philologische Studien: Festgabe für Eduard Sievers* (Halle, 1896) 30 ff. I have not
although it made no mention of the works of Davidson and Coblentz. The "distinctive characteristics" of the texts were thus somewhat destabilized by the availability of modernized, "corrected" readings. The characteristics of the York plays which appeared distinctive (if any) to the student of this text must have been as much a product of Manly as of the York cycle. This text was a teaching text, and its influence was readily apparent in the next several generations of medieval drama scholars in their continued reading of cycle plays as essentially interchangeable and in their characterizations of the York cycle.

Some of the finer points in the theory of evolutionary analysis of dramatic types were developed by Felix Schelling in 1898. For Schelling, the fields of classification were title, author, dates, sources, dramatic construction, literary style and versification; these permitted one to

consider the constitution of each play as mixed or simple elements, and the class and species of the drama to which it may in consequence be assigned. (Schelling 118)

Schelling's frankly evolutionary approach to the drama produced a tone which was methodical and precise, professional, objective and scientific. The all-encompassing study he proposed was "as yet far from complete" (Schelling 117), but "ought to cast a new and illuminating light, not only on the dramatic relations of the time, but upon the whole history of English literature." (Schelling 120) Schelling demonstrated the desire to catalogue texts in Darwinian terms of class and species in order to arrive at a history of English literature which marked many of the studies which followed.

The Miscellany dedicated to Frederick Furnivall on his seventy-fifth birthday in 1901 consulted these works.


included a pair of York articles. W.A. Craigie\textsuperscript{18} demonstrated that the York plays were composed by someone familiar with the fifteenth-century English vernacular \textit{Gospel of Nicodemus}, and fixed the date of the plays c. 1350, and thus [they] form part of the same vigorous literary movement in the North which has given us the \textit{Cursor}, the northern \textit{Homilies and Legends}, the \textit{Frisk of Conscience}, and other notable works. (Craigie 61)

This information opened two areas of discussion: the process and timing of the plays' composition, and the relationship of their texts with others of the same period. Arthur Leach\textsuperscript{19} used the surviving records of Beverley and Lincoln to argue that "the origin of the English play... must not be sought in country monasteries and among the 'religious'... but in the great towns and among the common townspeople, or the secular clergy who lived and worked among them" (Leach 206), and "in the developments of the great town democracies and craft guilds of Flanders, whether French or Teutonic." (Leach 234) Leach's hypothesis was based mainly in guild records, and did not include any links to a grander scheme of the evolution of English literature. He was akin to Lucy Toulmin Smith in his discovery of origins which were popular and secular rather than French or liturgical.

The search for origins crystallized but by no means ended with E.K. Chambers' 1903 publication of \textit{The Medieval Stage}\textsuperscript{20}. As comprehensive and sometimes eccentric in form as the great multi-volume works of Warton, Collier or Morley, Chambers used the evolutionary approach to synthesize new anthropological information about folk-practices with existing nationalistic interest in the beginnings of English literature. Methodologically, Chambers incorporated as many records from as many sources as possible: guild and municipal records were suddenly much more available through his work. However, he used

\textsuperscript{18}W.A. Craigie, "The Gospel of Nicodemus and the York Mystery Plays" \textit{An English Miscellany Dedicated to Dr. Furnivall} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901) 52-61.


\textsuperscript{20}E.K. Chambers, \textit{The Medieval Stage} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903) 2 volumes. All quotations are from volume two, as the first deals only with Latin tropes and folk practices.
the records of all areas at once, rather than examining the history of each place separately. This provided a generalized, "typical" description of the Corpus Christi play, rather than a specific, differentiated history of individual plays; additionally, since it provided such an abundance of records from which to choose, Chambers could appear to prove nearly anything. In doing so, he had a profound effect on the scholarship of the York cycle and on that of medieval drama in general. The mountain of evidence for Chambers' vision of dramatic evolution seemed indisputable. The study began with a desire to "state and explain the pre-existing conditions which, by the latter half of the sixteenth century, made the great Shakespearean stage possible." (Chambers vi) The following quotations provide a condensation of Chambers' story of the evolution of English drama, a process which he termed secularization:

the records and texts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries bear witness to the effective survival of all the diverse types of play, to which the evolution of the dramatic instinct gave birth in its progress from liturgical office to cosmic cycle. (Chambers II:124)

[By] about the middle of the thirteenth century... the condition of any further advance was that the play should cease to be liturgic... [During] the following hundred years... the newly shaped drama underwent... secularization.... Out of the hands of the clergy it passed to those of the laity.... to this formal change corresponded a spiritual or literary one... In their origin as officia for devotion and edification, they came... to be primarily spectacula for mirth, wonder and delight. (Chambers II:69)

What began as a mere spectacle devised by the ecclesiastics for the edification of the laity, came in time to appeal to a deep-rooted native instinct of drama in the folk and to continue as an essentially popular thing, a ludus maintained by the people itself for its own inexhaustible wonder and delight... the instinct which made the miracle-plays a joy to the medieval burgher is the same instinct which the more primitive peasant satisfied in a score of modes of rudimentary folk-drama.... The popularity of the devil scenes in the plays is the most striking manifestation of this identity. (Chambers II:147, 148)

As the texts grow and especially as they draw on the apocryphal books or the great medieval vernacular epics for matter not in the liturgical plays, the vernacular steadily gets the upper hand.... the coming of the vernacular affected the character of the medieval drama: it had been cosmopolitan; it
was to be national. (Chambers II:89, 91)

The cycles required in many cases a larger number of actors than the ecclesiastical bodies, even with the aid of wandering clerks and the cloister schools, could supply. It was necessary to press the laity into the service.... It was a further step in the same direction when the laity themselves took over the control and financing of plays. For this one must look to that most important element in mediaeval town life, the guilds. (Chambers II:87)

With out-of-doors plays, climactic conditions began to be of importance.... Another high day for the cyclical drama, notably in England... was the recently established feast of Corpus Christi.... The method of the great English cycles seems to point to a more complete merging of procession and play... the popularity of the pageants might throw the strictly religious aspect of the procession rather into the shade. The two would then be severed again, but the play might still retain its processional character. This is not, I think, an unreasonable conjecture as to how the type of play found, say at York, may have come into existence. (Chambers II:94, 96)

[the processional method] was not the primitive method, and... it probably arose from an attempt about the beginning of the fourteenth century to adapt the already-existing miracle plays to the distinctive feature of the festival of Corpus Christi. (Chambers II:134)

[The] tendency to expansion and coalescence.... culminates in the formation of those great dramatic cycles of which the English Corpus Christi plays are perhaps the most complete examples. (Chambers II:70)

The English miracle play reaches its full development with the formation of the great processional cycles almost immediately after the establishment of the Corpus Christi festival in 1311. The local tradition of Chester... is found to fix the foundation of the Chester plays in 1328.... those of York in 1378... were to take place at stations antiquitatis assignatis in 1394. (Chambers II:108, 109)

With the progress of the new ideas, the big cycles began to be irregularly performed or to undergo textual modification. The plays of York, for example, were shorn in 1548 of the pageants representing the Death, Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin.... Even where the plays survived they were Protestantized, and as Corpus Christi Day was no longer observed, the performances had to be transferred to some other date. At York the text of the Corpus Christi play was 'perused and otherwise amended' in 1568. In 1569 it was acted upon Whit-Tuesday. Then it lay by until 1579, when the book was referred to the Archbishop and Dean for further revision, and
apparently impounded by them. (Chambers II:111, 112)

Apart from its sociological implications, apart from the insight which it gives into the temper of the folk and into the appeal of religion, it is of the highest interest as an object-lesson in literary evolution. (Chambers II:3)

Chambers included a huge amount of appendix material including a brief summary of the York records (Chambers II:399-406) and a bibliography (Chambers II:409-412) which supplied up-to-date information on the relations between the texts. His approach to problematic areas such as the Towneley MS's geographic origin, or the Chester cycle's historical beginning, or the Ludus Coventriae MS's relation to Coventry tended to be conciliatory rather than revolutionary: he considered the contradictory evidence, but tried to find a logic that would fit it into his narrative. The book was useful and influential because it contained so many records, because it linked the medieval texts with the fascinating new information about folk practices, and because it provided a coherent, attractive and authoritative version of The Story.

Brander Matthews\(^2\) demonstrated in 1903 that American academics were thinking in similar terms, with perhaps more emphasis on scientific imagery and less on English nationalism. Matthews used large amounts of biological imagery to colour his narrative of dramatic progress: in the Roman empire, "dramatic literature was dead... and the theatres fell into ruin" but in the middle ages, "the germ of it... grew sturdy within the walls of the Church until it was strong enough to support itself" (Matthews 3); "there was steady growth" until "when the mystery was thus grown to its full length and swollen huge... it was thrust out of the Church" (Matthews 9) and absorbed from the minstrels the "humour, joyous gaiety, vivacious realism, and... reckless vulgarity" which is "the direct descendant of the rude humour of the Latin rustics" (Matthews 10), "perhaps even older than the mystery" (Matthews 13); all of these developments "were made gradually and tentatively and with no intent to bring about any radical transformation." (Matthews 16) Matthews de-emphasized national differences, finding that "the history of this development was very much the same

\(^2\)Brander Matthews, "The Medieval Drama" Modern Philology I (June 1903) 71-94. Neither Matthews nor Chambers mentioned the other's work.
throughout Europe; "the religious drama of England is very like that of France" (Matthews 3) and "as the English mystery, like the architecture of the English churches, is derived directly from the French models, the French form demands attention first." (Matthews 16) Variations in staging were attributable to climatic conditions, and the York plays were representative of all English medieval theatre. These variations were

the modification of the station into the mansion in one country and the pageant in the other. In England, the entire mystery... seems to have been presented in a single day, the performance beginning as early as four in the morning.... the pageants followed the religious procession... the control of the mysteries was assumed by the guilds. (Matthews 19-20)

Matthews assumed that the details of the York plays provided the rule for all English medieval performances, although the information available in the Digby and Chester plays contradicted his generalizations. Although he discussed the Mary Magdalene play, he separated it from the cycles, criticizing the medieval mind for its uncritical "confusion of species", finding in the admixture of elements evidence of democratic representation of average intelligence, rather than 'literature' or 'the hand of a true dramatist'. This use of York as the representative of English medieval drama became more pronounced as time passed.

1903 was an important year for medieval drama scholarship: Charles Gayley also published the first volume of Representative English Comedies, which had a major effect on the direction of York studies for many years. The volume began with an essay titled "An Historical View of the Beginnings of English Comedy" which focussed on the development of comic elements in the medieval plays as the pivotal element in the evolution toward Shakespeare. Along with this isolation of a single formal element came an increased nationalistic focus on the specifically English qualities of the plays.

...the distinctively national note... characterizes the comic contributions to the sacred plays... the French mystery poets... make a specialty of the humour of deformity, a characteristic which appears nowhere in the English plays. The Germans in their turn, elaborate a humour peculiar to themselves,- elephantine, primitive, and personal.... In general a freer rein seems to have been given to the sacrilegious, grotesque, and obscene on the Continent than

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in England... the excess of ribaldry, grotesquerie, and diablerie does not assault the imagination as in the continental mysteries. (Gayley Comedies xxxvi)

Gayley assigned the York plays a compositional history of three periods, the second and third of which he characterized as the "comic" and "realistic" schools, which derived their significance from their influence in turn upon the Wakefield master.

To the leading playwrights of each of these schools - the former the best humorist, the latter the best realist of the York drama, to these anonymous composers of the most facile portions of the York cycle our comedy owes a still further debt; for from them it would appear that a poet of undoubted genius derived something of his inspiration and much of his method and technique - our first great comic dramatist, the Playwright of Wakefield. (Gayley Comedies xxv)

Gayley followed Pollard in his adulation of the Wakefield Master and especially of the Secunda Pastorum, calling him a "Chaucerian 'professor of holy pageantry"23 (Gayley Comedies xxix) and praising the play as an "epiphany". While he was primarily interested in the formal and historical development of English comedy, Gayley also argued that the cycles should be read as cycles, rather than episodically. "Taken as a whole, the craft cycle possesses the significance, continuity, and finality requisite to dramatic art; taken in its parts... it presents... the appearance of a mosaic." (Gayley Comedies xxxi) Finally, he argued

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23Gayley was taken to task for this phrase by his anonymous reviewer in The Athenaeum (1 August 1903) 150, who complained "The York friar William Melton still passes as 'professor of holy pageantry' although the sacra pagina of which he was professor cannot possibly be anything but Holy Writ." Although Gayley used the phrase in reference to the Wakefield Master and made no mention of Melton by name, he suggested the old image of the crafty play-writing monk, which was bitterly pointed out by Frances O'Neill, O.P.: "Dr. Gayley refuses to retract... that William Melton was a playwright, at least by avocation. Miss Lucy Toumin Smith says that his desire to have all attend Mass was probably inspired by the hope of selling indulgences. The charge is a gratuitous one and wholly unsupported. Mr. Arthur F. Leach might have made the statement by the force of hypothesis, since in his eyes to search for virtue among friars is a hopeless task." ("The Blessed Virgin in the York Cycle of Miracle Plays" American Catholic Quarterly Review 34 (1909) 439-455; this quote 455.) Gayley did in fact rewrite the passage in question, which in Plays of Our Forefathers became "this dramatic contemporary of Chaucer's" (177), but elsewhere continued to refer to the Wakefield Master as "the Player-clerk".
that the comic devil of the mysteries was "an anachronism created by certain historians of the drama" (Gayley Comedies xlvii), which grew from the "detached and sometimes serious devils of the cycles" through a middle period exemplified by "Titivillus and his humorous associates in the Wakefield Judicium" into the familiar farcical voice of Vice in the moralities. (Gayley Comedies xlviii)

Gayley's approach brought the York plays into Shakespeare's lineage, cleansing them of impropriety by reading the "inhuman cruelty" of the Crucifixion as being mitigated by the Divine comedy of salvation (Gayley Comedies xxii), and by promoting the comic scenes which Katherine Bates was later to criticize as sacrilegious as the signs of progress of the uniquely English national character.

In 1907, Joseph Tunison published Dramatic Traditions of the Dark Ages24, a (rather eccentric) study heavily influenced by Darwinian thought which argued for the Byzantine heritage of the Western dramatic tradition. Since he said nothing specific about York, and only mentioned Towneley once in passing, I quote only his final paragraph:

The earliest branch of the Greek tree was the Sanskrit-Prakrit tragicomedy of India, from which the curious drama of China was certainly derived subsequent to the activity of the Buddhist missionaries. In the West the main trunk was successively Hellenic, Roman, Hellenistic, Byzantine, Italian. In the Hellenistic period there was a branch, the Christian drama, which still survives in the passion play. In the Byzantine period branched off the ecclesiastical theatre, the Morality and the Mystery. In the Italian period, beginning about a generation before the fall of Constantinople the whole long-lived tradition of the drama and the stage was transferred to western Europe. It branched almost immediately into the Italian, Spanish and English theatre. From the Italian stem arose the modern Greek drama; from the Spanish, the French comedy; from the English, the German. Such would be approximately what a complete analysis of the history of the drama must show. (Tunison 334)

J.M. Manly finally examined the literary use of Darwinian theory in the same year25,


demonstrating the quasi-religious character of what had become the organizing principle of a system of beliefs:

...it is practically impossible to speak or think of any unified body of facts showing progressive change as men habitually spoke and thought before 1860. (Manly "Literary Forms" 580) Darwin... made it a doctrine that must be accepted by all men not already committed by age to other views of the processes of creation... as it were, articles of faith. (Manly "Literary Forms" 578) ... we, like the thinkers in all fields of thought, have come under the pervasive, dominating influence of a great zoological theory. (Manly "Literary Forms" 591)

He argued not for discarding the approach, but for adapting it in accord with a newer biological theory, the Mutation Theory of Professor Hugo DeVries. This theory proposed that new types could come into existence in an instant, by means of mutation, rather than slowly, by means of gradual changes over a long period of time: it fitted easily into the history of drama, because it provided a metaphorical explanation for the inexplicable appearance of new dramatic forms.

At the same time was added the one element necessary to change it into drama; the sentences were sung, not by two halves of the choir, but by two priests impersonating the angels at the tomb, and by three other priests impersonating the three Marys. The significant point is that here the drama came into existence at a single bound, and not by insensible gradations. (Manly "Literary Forms" 584) When once the necessary elements came together, the new species existed; a moment before, and there was nothing like it; the combination was made and the new species was complete. (Manly "Literary Forms" 586)

It seems ironic from the perspective of seventy-eight years that he could conclude "its purpose has been fully accomplished if the analogies we have been discussing have aided us at all in freeing ourselves from the unconscious influences which distort our vision and our thought." (Manly "Literary Forms" 595) It is a reminder of the near-impossibility of objectively separating one's critical outlook from that of one's context.

A more productive quest for origins was made by George C. Taylor26 in the same

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26George C. Taylor, "The Relation of the English Corpus Christi Play to the Middle English Religious Lyric" Modern Philology 5:1 (July 1907) 1-38.
year into materials closer in time to the biblical plays: the lyric poetry. In the York Nativity and Assumption sequences, Taylor found embedded lyrics from several sources of the Five Joys of Mary, and in the Judgement play, "the most primitive form of the four plays in English" (Taylor 12) of the medieval Doomsday literature. While he also mentioned the literature of the *Planctus Mariae*, he left it beyond the scope of the article, which was merely a quick survey of a vast field. He questioned "to what extent the plays are indebted to the antecedent and contemporaneous religious lyric of Middle English" (Taylor 15), suggesting along with Manly that "the dramatic instinct, once set going, tended to dramatize material already at hand in other provinces of literature." (Taylor 16)

In 1908, Charles Gayley released *Plays of Our Forefathers* 27, a panoramic attempt at completeness much in the style of Warton. His discussion of the York plays expanded upon that of *Representative English Comedies* by solidifying the story of development into three distinctive phases: the formative stage, marked by Davidson's philological tests as containing the Northern Septenar stanza; the second, which contained

the original comic parts of *Sacrificium of Cayme and Abell*, of the *Noe and His Wife*, and of the *Shepherds* are of a humorous master of what we may call the middle period. (Gayley *Forefathers* 154)

The third level of development, and for Gayley the most significant, was the school of Realism, which he suggested was the work of one master whom he identified as the York Realist. This group of texts contained

XXVI, *The Conspiracy to Take Jesus*; XXVIII, *The Agony and Betrayal*;
XXIX, *Peter's Denial; Jesus Before Caiaphas*, XXX *Pilate's Wife*, etc.;
XXX, *Herod*; XXXI, *Second Trial Before Pilate Continued*, and probably
XXXII, *Purchase of the Field of Blood*. (154) If these six or seven Pilate and Herod plays are to be attributed to one author, then that author is more or less responsible also for three other plays, XXXVI-XXXVIII, the *Mortificatio, Harrowing and Resurrection...* If we assume, and not without reason, that he also retouched the *Christ Led up to Calvary* (XXXIV) and the *Crucifixion*

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27Gayley, Charles. *Plays of Our Forefathers and Some of the Traditions Upon Which the Plays were Founded* (London: Chatto & Windus / NY: Duffield & Co., 1908) Previous copyrights were held in 1904 by Fox, Duffield and Co., and in 1907 by Duffield and Co. The text makes frequent reference to *Representative English Comedies* and was clearly written after it.
(XXXV), we may regard him as the Passion Playwright of York. (Gayley Forefathers 157)

Gayley included the comparative analysis of rhyme-schemes to demonstrate that this set of plays was influenced by those of the middle-period, and further, that the middle-period and Realist plays influenced the work of the Wakefield Master. In the course of this examination, he discussed the York Passion sequence, which had previously been criticized for its "too-great realism". Gayley identified the following features as marks of the York Realist:

... the vivid brutality of the soldiers, the minute and horrible detail of their conversation, the quick retort and apt [sic], the picturesque phrase, the elaborate dramatic dialogue... the unconscious but skilful distinction between characters somewhat similar... the control of supernumeraries, the interplay of the pathetic, the wonderful and the fearful; the accumulation of scenes within the act, and the frequent use of dramatic surprise. (Gayley Forefathers 156) The distinctive playwright of the later or realistic period is marked by his observation of life, his reproduction of manners, his dialogue and the plasticity of his technique: whether in presentation of the comic, or of the tragic and horrible, aspect of his narrative. (Gayley Forefathers 158)

Gayley advanced studies of the York plays tremendously by giving a name and time to the most stylistically distinctive parts of the cycle. No longer a only philological or sociological curiosity, the plays could now be approached as literature.

A 1909 Yale doctoral thesis by Samuel B. Hemingway28 provided a comparative set of editions of the Nativity plays from all four cycles, with the greatest amount of concentration on the Chester plays. Hemingway argued that the internal evidence provided by comparative readings of Higden's Polychronicon and the Chester plays demonstrated Higden's authorship of the plays, and he argued against direct French or Anglo-Norman influences; further, he claimed that common elements in the Coventry and Towneley plays indicated "that instead of their being all derived from some parent cycle, the other Shepherds' plays, and particularly the Towneley Prima Pastorum, are borrowed from the Chester play."

The York Nativity plays were very briefly discussed; York was characterized as "the most conventional and typical of the simplest form of mystery play" (Hemingway xxxix) and as "offering a sort of norm by which to compare and judge the other plays. They are the simplest and closest of all to liturgical drama." (Hemingway xl) Although Hemingway found little of interest in York, he did find much which was objectionable: "... limping verse and commonplace ideas. The Joseph Play is the most forced and ineffective of all the plays in this collection, and the Shepherds' Play, though possessing some merit in its realism and humour, falls below its parallels in the other cycles." (Hemingway xl) Hemingway exemplified a certain prejudicial reading which the York plays have received from time to time in which, because they were perceived as the most normal and least problematic of the four collections, they were also perceived as the least interesting.

Frank W. Cady examined the Nativity and Resurrection sequences of the mystery plays in the same year, and came to much different conclusions. Cady's work was exquisitely scientific in method, and unquestioningly evolutionary in approach. By means of a passage-by-passage comparison of the cycle plays from what he identified as the first, or Liturgical Period of their growth, with surviving Latin liturgical plays from Christmas and Easter, he hoped to demonstrate their growth from a common liturgical source. He assumed that "the direction of growth was towards the separation, rather than the grouping, of scenes" (Cady "Liturgical" 432) and that "this growth is an evolution. The limits of the periods are not sharply defined. They merge into each other." (Cady "Liturgical" 422) The results of

Both Chambers and Gayley had also argued for the authority of the Higden story, in what appears to have been a movement toward the establishment of the mystery plays as an older and therefore more canonically worthy form. I can only hypothesize that Hemingway's thesis was likewise motivated from an Anglophilic desire to claim as many centuries and as little outside influence as possible. In 1910 Ward called the Chester plays "the youngest series of the four", but repeated the argument that although the Chester plays show "traces of a French original,... this was not a collective series and... it was not copied by the writer who elaborated the Chester Plays in their present form." Cambridge History of English Literature Vol. V, p. 16, n. 1.

this comparison suggested "for T[owneley], Y[ork], and Cov[entry] a common liturgic source in the Christmas series, and the same for T[owneley] and Y[ork] in the Resurrection series" (Cady "Liturgical" 467). Of the Nativity series of the other two cycles, he said:

it is evident that Chester could not have been developed from the same liturgical source from which T[owneley], Y[ork] and true Cov[entry] are derived. So-called Coventry differs even more, introducing a number of additional scenes connected with Mary's birth etc. The divergences in these two cycles but emphasize the similarities in the other three. (Cady "Liturgical" 460)

The source itself could not be identified, but he conjectured (with reservations) that it may have been an earlier, unrecorded version of the Use of York. Cady's methodology added a much-needed element of precision to the comparative study of medieval plays. Despite his repeated emphasis on the conjectural quality of his work, his cool, methodical approach and the depth of his research provided an authoritative quality to his findings, and set the tone for future explorations into the relations between plays.

The rapidly expanding academic field of medieval drama occasionally registered dissenting voices, particularly in regard to its predominantly Protestant approach to Catholic materials. Francis O'Neill O.P.31 criticized earlier writers such as Hone and Warton, "who persist in misrepresentation, owing to the opportunity thus given to write for the entertainment of prejudiced readers" (442), and took Davidson to task for the statement that

It becomes our task to show the shifting standpoint within the liturgy which arose from the acceptance of a new theological dogma, to detect the introduction of a genuinely tragic moment, and to trace the growth of dogmatic expression within the Church service itself. (O'Neill 444)

O'Neill demonstrated that "the doctrine of the Real Presence was accepted without question by the Universal Church throughout the period of the English miracle play", and asserted "there is nothing in the chapter to indicate that the author [Davidson] possessed more than an ordinary Protestant knowledge of either Catholic dogma or the facts of Church history" (O'Neill 444). He criticized Gayley regarding his view of the Feast of Fools as in "need of

[reform] still newer and more Herculean" as "having slipped into the old fallacy of "Post hoc, ergo propter hoc". Finally turning to the subject of his title, he pleaded that if one would study profitably the Blessed Virgin as presented in medieval drama that at the outset a just estimate be formed of the place she has occupied in the religious life of the English people. (O'Neill 450)

He demonstrated the "antiquity of the devotion to the Blessed Virgin in England" (O'Neill 451), arguing that "it cannot be fairly maintained that the numerous references to the honour paid the Virgin Mary are interpolations" (O'Neill 453), concluding with a summary of the Virgin Mary's fourfold role in the York cycle as "maiden, mother, wife and advocate", stating that "the history of her life... is lacking in nothing which dramatic art demands.... they had as a main purpose the teaching of religious truths and the inculcation of sound moral principles." (O'Neill 454) O'Neill's work, like Manly's 1908 article, questioned the underlying assumptions which shaped the criticism of the medieval drama at this point, and charged that much of this work was based upon and supported a fundamentally prejudiced and incorrect "official" vision of the period. Certainly, much of the scholarship from this time was marked and even motivated by an anti-Catholic bias; the evolutionary metaphor contained a profound value judgement against religiosity.

The "official" viewpoint might very well be represented by The Cambridge History of English Literature, in which the Corpus Christi plays were classed as a subsection of

32Gayley, Plays of our Forefathers p.50.

33He is referring at this point to mention of these honours made in monastic chronicles. He does not identify the source of the charge that these references are interpolated, or the reasoning behind such as charge. One might hypothesize that the argument would be: if corrupt late-middle-ages Catholic revisions added the materials of Mariolatry to the records of an earlier, purer Church, then the Reformation was all the more needed in order to return to the truth of that earlier age.

Shakespearian pre-history, rather than as Middle English literature. Ward said of them:

There seems every reason to believe... that a large proportion were... written by monks.... [They were] an essentially popular growth, not at all intended to satisfy more elevated or refined tastes... In nothing are the illiterate more conservative than in their amusements. (Ward Cambridge 15)

The purpose of his discussion was to identify "certain artistic features and qualities which entitle them to a place in our literature" (Ward Cambridge 18), and (apart from such dismissively footnoted qualities as "ease and appropriateness of dialogue; a dramatic vigour... conciseness and clearness of exposition, and adequacy... of meditative passages" (Ward Cambridge 18-19)), these were "the conscious humour...[and] conscious pathos" by which certain plays "must be held to rank as literary productions of no common kind" (Ward Cambridge 19), though it was as yet "going rather far to speak of the York schools of humour and realism." (Ward Cambridge 20)

Creizenach identified the sources of the York plays as "famous works of contemplative literature, the Meditations of Saint Bonaventura... the apocryphal gospels", agreeing with Ward that the later middle ages were not a period of great poetical splendour (Ward Cambridge 48), and identifying one of the underlying reasons for the intense interest in the comic: "it is precisely in comic scenes that national traditions were developed." (Ward Cambridge 49) His understanding of Catholic theology must have left O'Neill furious, for he defined the Corpus Christi procession as

a sort of triumphal progress, by which the Church, after centuries of struggle, solemnized her absolute and full victory over the minds of men.

Of the York plays, he praised the "powerful realism" (Ward Cambridge 51) in the depiction of tyrants, and the "evident tenderness" (Ward Cambridge 53) of the characterization of Joseph. He also read the record of the Pater Noster play as evidence of the beginnings of the morality play, and concluded his discussion of the religious drama by saying "Mysteries came to an end, under the double influence of Puritan enmity to the stage and of the vigorous growth of the Elizabethan drama." (Ward Cambridge 62) This approach hardly encouraged further interest in the plays, using them mainly as evidence of the development of the English mind.
Frank W. Cady re-examined Pollard's classification of the three strata of development in the Towneley plays, and relocated Pollard's second grouping, the borrowings from the York cycle, as the latest. He argued:

1. That Professor Davidson was correct in calling these couplets and quatrains editorial.
2. That the couplets are used in editing every group except the plays borrowed directly from York.
3. That the quatrains alone are used in editing the plays borrowed directly from York.
4. That the quatrains are also used with the other groups.

From these four facts, two conclusions are obvious:—

1. That at least two editors have been at work upon the cycle.
2. That the York group of direct borrowings must have been the latest addition to the cycle, for that group alone contains no couplets. (Cady "Couplets" 578)

He concluded:

that two editors have been at work, that the plays from York were added to the cycle after the couplet editor had completed his work, and further, that the York borrowings must have been the last addition to the cycle, since all the other groups, even the Wakefield, contain couplets... The fact that the York group must have been added to the Towneley cycle after the Wakefield group was written, does not hinder York from having been written as part of the York cycle, before Wakefield was written as part of the Towneley cycle... The question of which this article is a discussion is not the question of the time of writing, but the question of the order of insertion in the Towneley cycle. (Cady "Couplets" 583-584)

Cady did not address Gayley's classification of 'comic' and 'realistic' schools because his work was purely concerned with prosody. The question of the relations between the York and Towneley cycles was to prove so fruitful a field of discussion, that for the next several years, nearly every study of the York plays was motivated by it.

In June 1911, Frances Foster called Pollard's three strata into further doubt by

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36Frances Foster, "The Mystery Plays and the Northern Passion" Modern Language Notes 26 (June 1911) 169-171.
proposing that the Towneley plays originated not in liturgical drama, but in transposition from *The Northern Passion*. She also suggested that a number of the York plays\(^{37}\) were indebted to this source:

In fact, *The Northern Passion* + *The Gospel of Nicodemus*\(^{38}\) would appear to supply the basis for the whole plays, the sources being used to supplement each other. Whatever use the liturgical drama may have served in developing the dramatic tradition, it seems clear that in these plays, at least, the author depended directly upon vernacular texts... obviously a much easier method than one which involved translation. (Foster "Passion" 171)

The resistance to this idea of inter-generic borrowing may have been based in the biological precept of the separation of species, of the poetic from the dramatic genre. In any case, despite the work of Foster and Craigie, the liturgical drama continued to be perceived as the source of the vernacular drama for many years.

Cady made another contribution to textual studies of the Towneley cycle in 1912\(^{39}\). It was his third such study and it contained his conclusions on the matter of the Towneley cycle's evolution:

I believe that it started from certain plays included in the church service, which must have followed the use of York. Out of this liturgical drama were developed plays 10-19 inclusive, the Christmas group; plays 25-28 inclusive, the Resurrection group; with a strong possibility that there was also a Passion play in this liturgy which developed plays 20-23 inclusive, the second section of the Passion group with the exception of play 24 and including play 32. I believe further, that the Old Testament plays 1-9 inclusive; the first section of the Passion group, the plays on Christ's ministry, plays 19 and 31; play 24 on the Talents; and 29 and 30, the Ascension and Judgement, were transitional, or from the final, or trade-guild period in the cycle's development. It is, of course, only in the final period of a cycle's growth that we can trace the work of editors, because we possess only the text of that

\(^{37}\)York plays XXVI, XXVII, XXVIII, XXIX, XXXII, XXXIII, XXXIV, XXXV, XXXVI, and XXXVIII.


period. In this cycle, this development seems to be about as follows. There are traces of four editings, although it is not possible to say whether the last two are by different men. The W editor came first. He always based his work upon an already existing play, so that in scenes with a liturgical source his editings preserve the original structure. The couplet editor, who followed him, never showed much originality and so retained the older structure and even a phrase here and there of the older text. He was followed by the editor who made the borrowings from York, and who is, I am inclined to think, identical with the fourth, or quatrain editor. His work was mainly in the substitution of some scenes borrowed from Y for others already present in the cycle. The cycle as we now have it, is therefore, an evolution. (Cady "Passion" 599-600)

This level of textual examination was presently only happening to the Towneley cycle, mainly on the basis of the elevation of the Wakefield Master to the canonical status of "poet". Interest in the textual development of the York cycle was much slower to develop and remained linked with Towneley studies through the connection of the shared plays.

Hardin Craig used the evolutionary model to examine the old Testament plays of all four of the English collections in 1913, concluding that they were linked with the liturgical material surrounding Easter, rather than Christmas. He said "the Old Testament plays originated in the lectiones and responsoria of the period of Septuagesima and Lent" (Craig "Origin" 484), and hypothesized:

If the Old Testament plays originated within the Church itself, which in some cases at least they probably did, and at a season some weeks before Easter, then they must have been united later with the plays of Easter itself; and the whole group of Easter plays later joined with the whole group of Christmas plays to form the cycle. (Craig "Origin" 485)

Craig did not apply this theory to any specific cycle but drew various examples from all of them to support his ideas; he provided a generalized conception of origins rather than a specific examination of the surviving texts.

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Craig published a broader example of his approach in the following year, 1914. His project appears to have been motivated by the nationalist bias of reclaiming the Corpus Christi plays from French influence: they were, he argued, "of native growth" (Craig "Corpus Christi" 602); "the English religious plays grew from their liturgical origins on English soil and were not translated from the French" (Craig "Corpus Christi" 589). He characterized the processional Corpus Christi plays by "completeness of cyclical content" (Craig "Corpus Christi" 594), and located them "mainly to the north and east of England" (Craig "Corpus Christi" 590); they differed from another kind of cyclic play which he termed a "passion play" (Craig "Corpus Christi" 593) which was stationary. Most significantly, Craig dissociated the processionally-staged cyclical Corpus Christi plays from the Corpus Christi procession:

there is very little evidence to connect the plays, as is usually done, with the Corpus Christi procession (Craig "Corpus Christi" 594)... There is no evidence that the plays had been combined into cycles before the early part of the fourteenth century... It is of course believed on linguistic and metrical grounds that many of the plays go back to the thirteenth century. There is no evidence that the plays were written at the time of the establishment of the festival of Corpus Christi. They had for the most part been in existence long before that time. (Craig "Corpus Christi" 597)

Craig also dismissed the idea that the plays developed out of processional dumb shows on the grounds that "these could hardly have come into existence at all until after the community had been educated by familiarity with the plays." (Craig "Corpus Christi" 600) Craig's arguments emphasized the religious and English qualities of the Corpus Christi plays, de-emphasized their social and guild-produced qualities, and isolated them as a specific and peculiar literary phenomenon. The flaw in this argument was that he did not discuss the process by which the plays moved from Latin into English, or their relations with such similar Middle English materials as the Gospel of Nicodemus or the Northern Passion.

Craig's theories were applied to the liturgical drama by Adeline Jenney, who added

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allegorical material connecting Rachael, the wife of Jacob in the liturgical *Ordo Joseph*, with "the Rachael who utters the planctus in several liturgical plays of the Slaughter of the Innocents", in order to demonstrate the "pure" origin of the plays of Joseph in the matin lessons and responses and in the many sermons of the Lenten period." (Jenney 61; italics mine.) Jenney also pointed out the similarity in the Gregorian division of history "from Adam to Noah, Noah to Abraham, Abraham to Moses, Moses to the advent of Christ, from the advent of Christ to the end of the world" to the "outline of the cycles of Old Testament plays, which... grew out of the dramatization of the lectiones and responses." (Jenney 62)

In 1916, Merle Pierson attempted a carefully organized study of all the available records of performance in order to examine Davidson's evolutionary theory. He defined the theory in question as follows:

I. Crafts merely marching in the procession.
II. Crafts with banners in the procession.
III. Mute Mysteries.
IV. Spoken drama in the procession.
V. Separation of the plays from the procession.

On the authority of Mr. Spencer (*Corpus Christi Pageants in England*, p. 81) one more stage might be added:

VI. Pageant wagons and actors in the procession after the separation from the plays. (Pierson 111)

Pierson's study was methodologically unique in that for the first time, the records from different places were examined separately:

It will not do to say that since in Durham, the crafts with banners marched in the Corpus Christi procession, since in France the crafts acted mute mysteries, and since in Beverley the procession and the plays were separated, therefore the development followed the consecutive stages I, II, III, IV, V, VI. If, however, one should find that in Coventry every stage is represented in the correct order, he might assume that the theory was substantiated, at least for that one case. (Pierson 111)

In nearly every case, Davidson's theory could not be substantiated; for York, he said:

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The material for York presents some difficulties. After 1426, procession and pageants were on different days. Before 1426, the plays may, if the entry for 1426 has been correctly interpreted, have been acted during the procession. The course of the two through the city was the same. Both started at Holy Trinity (entries 1399, 1426) and stopped at St. Peter's and St. Leonard's. Obviously more material, covering the period from 1325 to 1425, must be found to settle the matter. (Pierson 155)

The article concluded that in York "I, II and IV to 1426 (¿), V" (159) are represented, and in general, that

If one wishes to find the real relationship between the Corpus Christi Procession and the Corpus Christi plays, he must find it between 1311 and 1400. We have as yet no material covering the period fully. The source material for the history of the plays in each town must be examined separately, and the conclusions obtained must be applied only to the individual places from which they were drawn. (Pierson 160)

Pierson presented a new methodology, rather than a new theory to the field; rather than attempting to hypothesize or to rework Davidson's theory, he pointed out the gaps in the available facts, and left them open, hopefully to be filled in by further discoveries of records.

Wells' 1916 Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1400 was an improvement in the way the York plays were perceived. Wells summarized the known information about the plays and MS, and then provided a remarkably positive critical review:

among the authors of the English plays, those of the York cycle are of notable independence and originality... When considered from all the points of view of age, extent, quality and influence, the York plays or the originals they represent, are the most important of the English cycles... The plays of the assumed first, or formative period... exhibit strongly the old liturgical character and purpose of merely making clear the incidents dealt with. But the pieces of the later periods are virile and spirited, fresh and vigourous, with a power that is rude and gentle by turns... the remarkably realistic treatment of the subjects... achieves an obvious prime purpose of vivifying and actualizing the stories by presenting them in terms of the vulgar life of the day. (Wells 555)

In 1917 studies of the York cycle received a boost from Maud Sellars, who published

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selections from the York Mercers' records through the Surtees Society. This volume provided more details about the production of the plays and their inter-relationship with the workings of the Mercers' Guild. Sellars showed the Doomsday play as a comparatively small part of the day-to-day life of the guild: "originally the Mercers themselves took part in the representations, but their civic and social importance forbade such diversions and professionals were introduced to take their place." (Sellars Mercers xxiv) Commenting on a 1526 inventory, twenty-four years after Thomas Drawswerd was hired to substantially remake the pageant, she said: "It is a dreary picture of dilapidation, the great angels which want one wing is pathetic, the absence of one little angel heartbreaking." (Sellars Mercers xxvi) More importantly, she provided a fascinating picture of the culture of the guild itself:

The easy interdependence of social and religious life forms an attractive picture (vii)... after 1420 the documents are full of personal details which bring before us a crude, reckless, possibly dishonest crowd; but men who unconscientiously were doing their part as pioneers of the empire. (xiii) The merchants devoted themselves to amassing wealth with a wholehearted zeal unrivalled even by the frenzied efforts of the twentieth-century gold-worshipper." (Sellars Mercers xix)

She also noted an (assumed) connection of the Mercers' Guild with the Paternoster play, wondering "why it was suddenly appropriated by the Mercers." (Sellars Mercers xxv)

The meter of the York Shepherds' play was compared with that of the Shrewsbury Officium Pastorum by Frances Miller in 1918. Miller found "similarities of thought and diction" as well as "metrical correspondences" (Miller "Metrical" 93) between the two texts. The comical portion of the York play between lines 38-85 has no relation to the Shrewsbury fragment and may be passed over" since "the comic nature of the interpolated material [is] indicative of a later, more secularized period of composition than that producing the more strictly liturgical stanzas which precede and follow. (Miller "Metrical" 94)

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46Frances Miller, "metrical Affinities of the Shrewsbury Officium Pastorum and its York Correspondent" Modern Language Notes 33 (1918) 91-95.
Miller noted the presence of the Northern Septenar stanza in both the York and Shrewsbury texts, but did not specify what the relation between the two could be beyond "a connection closer than is immediately evident." (Miller "Metrical" 95) In 1919, she added another article which confirmed Miss Foster's early statement (Modern Language Notes 36, 169 ff.) that in the York passion plays the playwright turned to vernacular sources, and that the Northern Passion and the middle English Gospel of Nicodemus form the basis of whole plays. (Miller "Passion" 92)

In 1918, Grace Frank responded to Cady's work, arguing that it was misleading to assume as he did, "that the text of an entire cycle may periodically have been subjected to revision." (Frank "Revisions" 565) She demonstrated instead that "the plays themselves reposed in the hands of the guilds" (Frank "Revisions" 566); thus, in the case of York and Towneley,

each [was] subjected, at least during its formative period, to the vicissitudes of life within its particular craft. Some of the crafts were fortunate in being able to command the services of a remarkable Wakefield playwright. Others were content to borrow from York, perhaps revising or rewriting later. Still others continued to use old plays pieced out by borrowings from elsewhere, or enlivened by a scene or two from the hands of the Wakefield dramatist. The possibilities are almost inexhaustible, and nearly every play when thus considered presents a separate problem.... Indeed, to make confusion worse confounded, the York plays were themselves undergoing the various processes of change all the while. (Frank "Revisions" 571-572)

Frank also questioned the logic of assuming that couplets and quatrains indicated complete separate editings "since couplets and quatrains would offer the easiest forms for emendations at any time." (Frank "Revisions" 572) The comparatively small importance of the text in the records "points to the crafts, and not to the town authorities as those held responsible for the texts." (Frank "Revisions" 570) She argued that the plays at York were subjected to editing

\footnote{Frances H. Miller, "The Northern Passion and the Mysteries" MLA Notes 34 (1919) 88-92.}

\footnote{Grace Frank, "Revisions in the English Mystery Cycles" Modern Philology 15 (January 1918) 565-572.}
as an entire cycle only late in their history in 1568, when "this order, and the orders of 1575 and 1579 were brought about by the sweeping changes of the Reformation." (Frank "Revisions" 569)

Interest in the textual relations between the York and Towneley cycles peaked in the nineteen-twenties around the controversial theory of Marie Lyle⁴⁹, a student of Hardin Craig's who argued in her doctoral thesis that "at an earlier period, the York cycle and the Towneley cycle were, as cycles, one and the same." (Lyle Original Identity iii) While the idea of a "parent cycle" had already been suggested, Lyle went further in asserting that the process was not based on sole authorship of individual plays, which were then borrowed as separate entities from one cycle to the other, but that the process was one of continuous revision analogous to that which produced the popular ballad. This approach discarded the idea that the shared Towneley plays were necessarily borrowed later from an already existing York cycle; in fact, it made it possible for Lyle to argue that in some cases, the York play represented the later edition, and the corresponding Towneley one, the original or parent-cycle version.

The parent cycle, she argued, was a vernacular series characterized by the presence of the "Burns" stanza⁵⁰, which was based on the Northern Passion. Separation occurred at some point "at least before the year 1390" (Lyle Original Identity 108), when materials from the Gospel of Nicodemus were being assimilated.

The contact between York and Towneley must have extended into the period in which the influence of the Gospel of Nicodemus was felt, because two of the plays common to both cycles, The Harrowing of Hell, and The Resurrection, include material derived from that source. The separation must have occurred, however, before that material was completely assimilated, for three York plays incorporate Nicodemus material while the corresponding Towneley plays show no trace of it. Moreover the number of York plays in the Northern Septemar metre far exceeds the number of Towneley plays in the same metre, thus indicating that, in all probability, the Towneley cycle

⁴⁹Marie Caroline Lyle The Original Identity of the York and Towneley Cycles (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Studies in Language and Literature No. 6, June 1919; republished Pennsylvania: Folcroft Library Editions, 1974)

includes certain plays of the parent cycle, which, at York, were subsequently turned into the Northern Septenar metre or other stanzaic forms. (Lyle Original Identity 46)

York then underwent various revisions relating to the financial well-being of the guilds, while Towneley was later revised by the Wakefield editor in his characteristic stanza form. Sometimes the material of one, sometimes that of the other cycle most clearly represented the parent cycle; Lyle used a number of determining factors, including the presence of Septenar and "Burns" stanzas, the evidence provided by Burton’s lists and the York Memorandum Book, and the idea that the York plays underwent a post-separation simplification in order to bring them more into line with the scriptural narrative. She divided the plays into six groups: (1) plays that are almost identical, which she considered to be of the parent cycle; (2), (3) and (4) plays with varying degrees of similarity; (5) and (6) plays that show no evidence of relationship. She proposed that the following episodes of the second group ("similarity in structural outline and verbal agreement in isolated passages with retention of many common rhymes" (Lyle Original Identity 54) were closer to the parent-cycle in Towneley than in York: Purification of Mary: Magi/Coming of the Three Kings and their Gifts: Flight into Egypt; Temptation; Prophetic Prologue to Annunciation; John the Baptist (?); Conspiracy; Last Supper; parts of the Crucifixion and Burial; Appearance to Mary Magdalene; parts of Peregrini. Of the third group, the Annunciation and Visitation plays showed revision from Towneley to York; and of the fourth group, the Towneley Scourging corresponded to the York plays Condemnation and On the Way to Calvary. The York versions of these episodes were thus derived from a shared parent which was now more clearly exhibited in their Towneley counterparts.

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51"Probably, then, revisions at York were influenced, to some extent, by a desire to redeem the plays from the disrepute into which they had fallen in the fourteenth century." (Lyle Original Identity 45) [Note 151: "Robert Grosseteste and Robert de Brunne considered attendance at the mysteries a sinful act. See Collier Annals of the Stage 6 ff. The ranting of Herod and Pilate had become stock situations by Chaucer’s time. See Miller’s Prologue and Tale.”]
In a review of this thesis\textsuperscript{52}, which Lyle had claimed was based in part on her work\textsuperscript{53}, Grace Frank questioned some of Lyle's conclusions:

Miss Lyle's parent cycle, unlike Davidson's, pretends to no uniformity in style or verse structure.... No formal attempt is made to determine the chronological order of the metres.... Some of the plays composed in the Northern Septenar stanza, therefore, are assigned... to the parent cycle while others are believed by her to have been revised after the separation.... Miss Lyle might perhaps have established the dependence of her parent cycle upon another vernacular source by including the \textit{Cursor Mundi} in her comparisons. (Frank "Review of Lyle" 46, 47)

Frank's review was generous and sympathetic: she characterized Lyle's proposal as admirable, plausible and valiant and she concluded with the hope that Lyle would extend her researches to other cycles.

In 1923 J.R. Moore\textsuperscript{54} began to examine the plays, not for their origins, but for what they revealed about one aspect of the English dramatic tradition, the music. Moore focussed on angelic song in the Nativity sequences, finding that the idea of singing angels originated in the liturgical plays:

the carols that we know seem to have sprung up much later, under the influence of the already-existing Nativity plays. (90) When once the angelic songs had become fixed as a feature of the miracle plays, their spectacular possibilities could hardly have been overlooked... Latin liturgical songs must have seemed more and more a special attribute of the angels, as the human characters moved toward realism and comedy. (Moore 91)

Moore did not track the progress of angelic singing in the liturgical drama; he drew his examples purely from the vernacular plays. He found that angelic song was used "to locate heaven, to indicate the passing of angelic messengers, and to solemnize religious

\textsuperscript{52}Grace Frank, rev. of \textit{The Original Identity of the York and Towneley Cycles} by Marie C. Lyle. \textit{Modern Language Notes} 35 (1920) 45-48.

\textsuperscript{53}Lyle cited Grace Frank "Revisions in the English Mystery Plays" \textit{Modern Philology} XV (January 1918) 181-188, which she used in her revision of the 1917 Ph.D. thesis for publication in 1919.

\textsuperscript{54}J.R. Moore, "The Tradition of Angelic Singing in English Drama" \textit{Journal of English and Germanic Philology} 22 (1923) 89-99.
ceremonies" - they were "carried over from or patterned closely after liturgic chants and sequences." (Moore 92) He used the example of the York Shepherds as an instance of humour surrounding song, pointing the way forward to the sixteenth-century parodies of church music found in *King Johan, The Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene,* and *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus.* This article shows that the mystery plays were now available enough that they were being incorporated into the discourse on Elizabethan drama.

In 1924, Joseph Quincy Adams' anthology *Chief Pre-Shakespearian Dramas* appeared. It was clearly designed as a teaching, rather than a research tool. Like the Manly anthology, this textbook included specimens drawn from each of the surviving texts to form a composite cycle. The selections from York were again the Nativity and the *Last Judgement.* The composite cycle still did not include a Crucifixion play of any kind, although it moved closer to the Passion sequence by including the N-Town *Trial of Christ* and the Chester *Harrowing of Hell.* The texts were annotated with modern meanings, rather than with alternative Middle English readings. This would probably have been the textbook studied by most American undergraduates in their first encounter with the plays for the next two or three decades.

Tempe Allison contributed an article in 1924 titled "The Paternoster Play and the Origin of the Vices" which argued that the form of the lost York Paternoster play might have been based on the allegory of Hugo of Saint-Victor. In this scheme, each of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer was linked with one of the Seven Deadly Sins and with a petition for the corresponding virtue. He examined the *Beverley Minute Book* record of the "pageant of vicious" and the uses of allegorical vice figures in the later moralities, concluding that the York play was cyclical in form and that the vices were comical figures antecedent to those of the moralities, lesser sins to be held up for scorn in smaller sub-pageants. His

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study linked Latin and English renaissance materials and tried to sketch in the place that even non-extant texts must have held in English literary history.

A 'throwback' article by P.E. Dustoor\(^5\) appeared in 1926, in which like the philological scholars of forty years ago, he provided a short series of improved readings on medieval dramatic texts, "for what they are worth." His readings were based upon sense, meter, rhyme, the corresponding Towneley plays and internal conformities, and purported to present the "original" wording; they did not, however, present the reading of the MS as authoritative. Dustoor published again in 1928\(^5\), providing a long bibliography of previous work in the same vein (mostly old; the most recent was Manly's), and justifying his own on the basis of two motives: "emendation of seemingly corrupt readings, and... justification of the present text against certain emendations suggested by others."

John Manly\(^6\) argued in 1927 that the lost saint or "miracle" plays were more important in evolutionary terms than the extant Biblical episodes: "the Scriptural cycles had little capacity for developing skill in dramatic composition or a taste in dramatic art.... fundamentally... [they] are not dramatic and spectacular, but epic and oratorical." (Manly "Miracle Play" 141) "It was probably in the miracle play, rather than in the better-known scripture play and morality that the technique and themes of the stage of Shakespeare were developed." (Manly "Miracle Play" 153)

1928 was another fertile year for medieval drama scholarship; three different articles appeared in that year's \textit{PMLA} alone. Frances Foster\(^6\) argued that Gilbert Pilkington was


\textsuperscript{5}P.E. Dustoor, "Textual Notes on the York Old Testament Plays" \textit{Anglia} 52 (March 1928) 26-36.


\textsuperscript{6}Frances Foster, "Was Gilbert Pilkington the Author of the Secunda Pastorum?" \textit{Publications of the Modern Language Association} 43 (1928) 124-136.
probably not the author of the *Northern Passion*, and that even if so, was certainly not the author of the *Secunda Pastorum* or the *Tournament of Totenham*. She also attacked Lyle, finding that "Miss Lyle's 1390 has no significance in reasoning out the formation of the Towneley cycle" (Foster "Pilkington" 134), and after the application of linguistic tests, that it "fits neatly with Pollard's dating in the first decade of the fifteenth century." (Foster "Pilkington" 135) Foster did not take the implications of this argument for the dating of the York cycle any further.

Louis Wann\(^1\) made a new examination of the Towneley MS, which had been housed in the Huntington Library in San Marino CA since 1922. He too found evidence to substantiate Pollard: most stage directions were in Latin, in black ink; yet every one of the plays which deviates from the uniform use of black stage-directions in Latin (VIII, XIV, XVIII, XX, XVI and XXVII) belongs to the "York-borrowing stage" - the second of the three stages designated by Pollard.... May not these facts suggest, if not the work of more than one hand, a possible difference in the character of the original manuscripts from which the one copy was made? May they not even suggest widely separated sources or localities from which the originals were derived? (Wann 147)

Eleanor Clark\(^2\) addressed the question of the relation of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* to the York plays, finding that "when tested by chronology, Miss Lyle's argument for the original identity of the two cycles appears to be essentially self-contradictory." (Clark 160) To do so, she examined the five plays which Lyle claimed contained *Nicodemus* material, and were different from the descriptions given by Burton: XXX, XXXIII, XXXVII, XXXVIII, and XXXIX. Questioning some obvious judgement calls on Lyle's part, Clark found two plays in their present form contain *Gospel of Nicodemus* material which is lacking in Burton's description; namely the role of Percula in XXX and that of the Centurion in XXVIII. On the other hand, in *The Second Trial* (XXXIII) and *The Harrowing of Hell* (XXXVII), though perhaps there is not

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\(^1\)Louis Wann, "A New Examination of the MS of the Towneley Plays" *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 43 (1928) 137-152.

agreement in all details between Burton's description of them and the text as we have it, the discrepancies cannot be accounted for on the basis of later additions from the *Gospel of Nichodemus*. In fact, material from this source was already present in the form of these plays described by Burton. (Clark 158-159)

Based on Craigie's identification of the York *Harrowing of Hell* with the *Gospel of Nichodemus* MS Harley 4196, which he dated in 1400, Clark concluded that the date of the revision must be after 1400, and before Burton's list in 1415. This play was, however, one of the six shared plays which Lyle identified as "parent cycle", and therefore pre-1390. Moreover, two more of them, *Pharaoh* and *The Doctors* contained the Northern Septenar stanza, which Lyle claimed was a manifestation of the *Gospel of Nichodemus* revision. Clark concluded:

> Scholars will hardly accept a reconstruction of the "parent cycle" of York and Towneley until it has been demonstrated that these six plays have actually escaped revision.... It seems more hopeful at least to account for the changes on the basis of revision by individual guilds rather than by the theory of a consistent metrical revision of the cycles. (Clark 160)

Clark suggested a large-scale change of focus in medieval drama studies: away from narrowly focussed hypothetical textual revisions, and toward the wider historical study of the social conditions that produced the texts we have. This approach had co-existed since Lucy Toulmin Smith's edition in 1885, and the recent work of Maud Sellars had given it further impetus.

Grace Frank⁶³ added another detail which demonstrated not only borrowing from the *Northern Passion*, but also the "general learning that a well-versed clerk of his day might possess" (Frank "St. Martial" 235). The York play of the Last Supper (XXVII) named a disciple "Marcelle", and incorporated the episode of the example of the young child; Frank identified the two as St. Martial of Limoges on the basis of several French sources, but refrained from identifying any one as the direct source of this motif.

> On a more serious note, Frank also published a response to the wrangling between

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Clark and Lyle in 1929. She pointed out that Clark "apparently confused the date of the poem [the Gospel of Nichodemus] with that of the MS in which it occurs" (Frank "Revisions" 315), and questioned Lyle's dependence on Burton's list:

it seems hazardous to me to attribute all discrepancies between it and the extant plays to revision, all agreements between it and the extant plays to Burton's knowledge of these very plays. Omissions in some cases may be due to carelessness or to a desire for brevity; agreement with surviving plays need not rule out agreement with earlier versions than we now have. (Frank "Revisions" 317)

Frank's voice was that of a mature moderator; she was carefully supportive of Lyle, holding the opinion that Lyle's work "considerably advanced our understanding of the factors underlying the many points of contact between the York and Towneley cycles." (Frank "Revisions" 317) She did not, however, support Lyle in the disputed areas: "the dates suggested by her must be abandoned... her attempts to identify the remains of "parent-cycle" plays do not always carry conviction... that the York and Towneley cycles were originally one as cycles... must remain at best hypothetical. (Frank "Revisions" 317-318)

The debate continued in the same issue with Lyle's rejoinder. She addressed criticism which was directed to the following three points in her thesis:

(1) the presence of revised plays in the parent-cycle stage (i.e. the original identity stage), (2) the partition in York of certain plays which are united in Towneley, (3) my suggested dating of the separation as "at least before the year 1390."

On point one, she said "this common cycle... underwent considerable development before the separation.... there is no inconsistency... between the revision of plays in the parent-cycle stage and Mrs. Frank's view that the text of an entire cycle was not periodically subjected to revision." (Lyle "Rejoinder" 320) With regard to the second point, she argued that the plays in question (Creation, Resurrection, Conspiracy, Scourging) in Towneley were composed

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in a simpler meter, and based the view that this form must therefore be older on Pollard's and Gayley's recognition\(^\text{66}\) of "the tone of an earlier period... 'an original didactic cycle'" (Lyle "Rejoinder" 321). After stanzaic analysis to demonstrate this contrast of forms, she concluded

> The case, thus, appears to favour the expansion of the York Creation plays from the simpler Towneley account. And likewise, in regard to the Towneley Resurrection, Conspiracy, and Scourging, it seems to me more reasonable to suppose that we have instances of expansion rather than contraction. (Lyle "Rejoinder" 323)

On the third point, she backed away from the date 1390, saying "my dating of the separation... is not essential to my theory of the original identity of the two cycles... It in nowise affects the evidence... there is no way of determining definitely the date." (Lyle "Rejoinder" 325) Lyle did not abandon the core of her thesis, but the evidence she used to prove it seemed less credible and more contrived, the more she argued.

Lyle's academic coffin was finally nailed shut by Frank Cady\(^\text{67}\). In an article which characterized her work at various points as "illogical... absurd" (Cady "Towneley" 389) "pure conjecture" (Cady "Towneley" 391) and "elaborate casuistry" (Cady "Towneley" 396), Cady rather convincingly charged Lyle with "that form of reasoning which returns upon itself, because it is implicitly based upon the very assumption which it attempts to prove." (Cady "Towneley" 394) Her thesis, he said, was based upon the assumption that

> until comparatively late in the vernacular development of the plays there were no presentations of a cycle at Wakefield, but that sometime after 1350 and prior to 1390 the vernacular York plays were transported to Wakefield and there began a separate existence. (Cady "Towneley" 389)

Cady argued instead that

> the plays in groups I [Christ's birth to the Doctors, preceded by Prophets] and III [Resurrection and Ascension]... certainly came from the same liturgical

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\(^{66}\) Lyle, "Rejoinder" 321 n. 11: *The Towneley Plays* EETSES LXXI, intro. xxiii-xxv; n. 12; *Plays of our Forefathers* (NY: 1907) 133, 164.

\(^{67}\) Frank W. Cady, "Towneley, York and True-Coventry" *Studies in Philology* 26 (1929) 386-400.
source, and probably the same was true of the second group [Passion: Conspiracy to Crucifixion]... The same liturgy was in use in York, Coventry and Wakefield... and that out of it, in each town, growing independently through repeated re-editings, year after year, had come the three cycles. (Cady "Towneley" 387-388)

After finding logical flaws in nearly all of her assertions, Cady suggested "a comparison of the development of these three cycles: a much more fruitful field of study than can be found in tracing the will-o'-wisp of editorial changes through analysis of meter and rhyme and phrasal similarities in the cycles." (Cady "Towneley" 400) Cady's article had two noticeable effects: prosodic analysis became less fashionable, its seductions and pitfalls having been demonstrated so clearly; and no more was heard from Lyle, or even in support of her work for some time.

The first person to challenge the evolutionary-liturgical approach was Oscar Cargill⁶⁸, who testified in 1930 to its "wide and enthusiastic acceptance" (Cargill 1) and closely questioned the hypotheses upon which it had been founded. His study implied that nearly all of the critical work on medieval drama to date was based on unproven assumptions. His easy dismissal of contemporary work in the field, now rather refreshing, must have been intolerable at the time:

Hypothetic "parent" cycles, elaborate theories based on "lost" plays, twelve thousand lines in complicated stanzas "growing" out of twenty-two Latin words - these contentions seem to me, frankly, to be absurd. (105)

Unfortunately, Cargill concluded his book with the reiteration of the unlikely hypothesis that Gilbert Pilkington was the compiler-author of the Wakefield cycle, and thus of the Secunda Pastorum⁶⁹. The combination seems to have doomed his book; George Coffman's review⁷⁰

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⁶⁸Oscar Cargill, Drama and Liturgy (NY: Columbia UP, 1930)


⁷⁰George Coffman, rev. of Drama and Liturgy by Oscar Cargill. Speculum 6 (1931) 611-617.
revealed a number of lapses in his logic and even in his use of sources, concluding: "this book ignores the great body of recognized work already done in this field, and... its main conclusions rest on discredited or unsupported conjectures." (Coffman "Review of Cargill" 617) The historical roots of the evolutionary-liturgical model were not examined again until 1965, by O.B. Hardison, and even he avoided mentioning Cargill's name.

Chester Curtiss returned to the endless analysis of Towneley/York relations in 193371, arguing in the case of the Harrowing of Hell, that

there are evidences of corrections of York in the Towneley text sufficient to indicate that Towneley had a text of York superior to that preserved; that Towneley made deliberate alterations of a York text; and that Towneley used a text of York closer in certain particulars to the source, the English *Gospel of Nicodemus*, than the extant text of York. (Curtiss 24-25)

Towneley therefore borrowed the York episode, revised it, and then the York version itself underwent revisions.

Adding a postscript in 1930 to the dispute over the sources of York play XXX, Eva Freeman72 suggested that the apocryphal bedding scenes might simply have been the products of ingenious advertising on the part of the guilds which produced the play, the Tapiters and Couchers: "probably the coverlids were waved about and displayed to fullest advantage as Dame Percula was being covered, and thus for a moment or so, the commercial instincts of the craft were given free play." (Freeman 394)

In 1932, Karl Young published an article on the Paternoster play73, including for the first time, the full Latin text of the return of the York guild of the Paternoster of 1389. Young summarized the following items pertinent to the play from it:

The primary function of the guild was to perform a play treating the Lord's


72Eva Freeman, "A Note on Play XXX of the York Cycle" *Modern Language Notes* 45 (June 1930) 392-394.

73Karl Young, "Records of the York Play of the Pater Noster" *Speculum* 7 (1932) 540-546.
Prayer, and... in it the sins and vices were denounced and the virtues were commended.... certain members of the guild were to accompany the performers through the streets... one is tempted to infer that the play was performed on one or more pageant-wagons.... In 1389 the guild owned no property except the equipment for the play and a wooden chest for storage. (Young "Pater-Noster" 543)

Young substantiated the idea that the play was large and episodic in nature:

Before yielding to the conjecture that the Merchants sometimes undertook the whole of the Pater Noster play along with Doomsday, however, one should observe that in the neighbouring town of Beverley, the Pater Noster play included eight separate paginae, and that the responsibility for each pagenda was assumed, not by one guild or association, but by several in cooperation. Thus in producing the single 'pagenda de Vicioso' the Merchants were aided by the 'gentilmen, clerici, et vadletti.' (Young "Pater-Noster 545)

The connection of the Mercers' Guild with the Pater Noster play was later discovered to be non-existent; the reading was based on a nineteenth-century correction to the manuscript which was detected under ultra-violet light.74

In 1933 Karl Young's The Drama of the Medieval Church75 sealed into dogma the hypothesis that the civic Corpus Christi plays were the lineal descendants of the liturgical Latin plays. Young argued that the origin of Christian drama was located in the Quem quaeritis Easter trope, distinguished from the liturgy itself by the presence of impersonation. This liturgical drama was, for Young, an entirely new phenomenon (in Manly's terms, a genetic mutation as the source of a new species) "free from the contamination of alien forms" (Young Drama I:1). His use of Darwin's model76 caused him to organize his extensive body of materials on evolutionary lines of increasing complexity; as in Chambers, these lines of


75Karl Young, The Drama of the Medieval Church (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933)

76see O.B. Hardison's Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), particularly Ch. 1: "Darwin, Mutations and the Origin of the Medieval Drama" for criticism of this system.
assumed chronological development did not always correspond with the historical dates of the examples, but the differences were explained as geographical differences in rates of development, areas in which the surviving manuscripts provided an incomplete picture, or differences in the dates of the texts and the manuscripts which contained them. The liturgical plays ranged from the simplest *Quem Quaeritis* trope to the possibility of entire cycles of Latin church drama. Young's point was not to prove that the vernacular drama evolved from the liturgical; this was merely the unquestioned assumption which shaped his "primarily descriptive, rather than historical" (Young *Drama* I:vi) investigation of the Latin church plays. Faced with an overwhelming mass of material\(^7\), his choice of the evolutionary "chronological" arrangement may have been "at least partially the result of a desperation concerning how such a mass of material could ever be arranged." (Flanigan 161) Young called it "the *logical* order of development, from the simplest to the most complex and elaborate. Presumably this is, in general, also the *historical* order." (Young *Drama* I:ix) He seems to have chosen his descriptive emphasis as one way of sidestepping the acknowledged problems of chronology; the second method was the argument that

Unquestionably there was much inter-borrowing of dramatic texts among literary centres all over the West. The Roman liturgy was international, the dramatic pieces were largely conventionalized, and the dates and provenance of the manuscript seldom assure us as to where and when their contents were first written. (Young *Drama* I:xiii)

This wide historical sweep had the effect of promoting the generalizing view that the vernacular Corpus Christi plays were a half-way stage of development between the purity of the liturgical drama and the brilliance of the Shakespearean stage, religious and yet irreverent, the work of *amateurs*. Despite his cautionary notes, Young's work appeared to demonstrate conclusively the evolutionary progress of the dramatic form. Like Chambers, Young saw the evidence of this progress in the adoption of the vernacular: "As the drama

\(^7\)Karl Young, "The Drama of the Medieval Church" in *A Memoir of Karl Young* (New Haven: privately printed, 1946) Quoted by C. Clifford Flanagan in "Karl Young and the Drama of the Medieval Church" *Research Opportunities in Medieval Drama* 27 (1984) 157-166, p.161.
relinquished its close association with established worship, it gradually abandoned also the Latin of the liturgy in favour of the language of ordinary life." (Young Drama II:423) He included an edition of the Shrewsbury fragments (Young Drama II:514-523), the vernacular of which was a distinctly Northern Middle English, to demonstrate this crossover, and he argued that the vernacular cycles were thus descendants of the Latin plays, rather than the result of the institution of the Festival of Corpus Christi:

the procession of Corpus Christi has probably been given an importance hardly justified by the known facts. Although the popularity of this feast and the elaborateness of the procession undoubtedly gave encouragement to the acting of plays, and influenced the methods of staging them, we are not to infer that the very existence of long religious plays in England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was due primarily to the institution of a new festival. (Young Drama II:425)

Like Chambers again, he also saw the incorporation of extra-liturgical elements, frequently comical, as a sign of advancement toward secular realism:

We can only infer that those who were especially ambitious for the development of the religious drama must eventually have desired a larger freedom for literary and theatrical expansion than could be tolerated within the confines of authorized worship. Particularly important.... was the impulse toward increasing the worldly appeal of the plays through the comic element.... the hearty development of these suggestions was possible only in secular surroundings. (Young Drama II:422)

These ideas all had profound effects on later studies of English vernacular drama.78 Young was the dominant influence until well into the 1950's.79 In later years, his work was seriously

78 John Wasson "Karl Young and the Vernacular Drama" Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama 27 (1984) 151-156 evaluated this effect, concluding "Karl Young was judging by the extant texts; what the records show is that what has been preserved in the way of medieval drama is not necessarily typical and that judgements based only on extant texts are likely to be misleading. In short, what we know now is that we are much less sure of what we know than Young was fifty years ago." (155)

79 Millett Henshaw, "A Survey of Studies in Medieval Drama" Progress of Medieval and Renaissance Studies in the United States and Canada 21 (August, 1951) 7-35. Henshaw declared "The current theory of the origin of liturgical drama still holds the field" (9) and warned the unwary reader about "radical criticism of the accepted evolution of medieval
questioned for its basis in "an unexamined assumption based on the nineteenth-century realistic theatre" (Flanigan 160); it stands however as a gigantic milestone in the history of early drama scholarship.80

The period from 1885 to 1933, during which Lucy Toulmin Smith's edition of the York cycle became a part of the corpus of English literature, coincided with the decades in which literary studies became professionalised. It is an odd period of scholarship: most studies of the York plays address the York plays only tangentially in their search of origins and relations. Despite the pronounced social approach of Lucy Toulmin Smith's edition, studies of the York plays in this period were dominated by textual approaches which revolved around the problem of their relationship with the Towneley cycle, and therefore their place in the development of English literature; a few focussed on their social context. The religiosity of the plays seems to have been a handicap to their appreciation. Their 'too-great realism' generated a small amount of commentary, but no attempts to understand how and why the plays worked in their own time. Explanations of their popularity were usually: 'they were the only drama available', or 'the Renaissance hadn't happened yet'. Anthologists avoided the Passion sequences of all of the cycle plays. A few Catholic scholars like Francis O'Neill registered dissenting voices.

The theory of evolution provided a useful tool with which textual studies could be 'scientized.' While scholars were not yet openly identifying themselves as the members of 'schools', some differences between British and American scholarship are apparent. American studies, such as that of Charles Davidson, tended to be more 'scientific', more focussed on the development of 'layers of revision' (usually three in number) in the text, and often friendlier to the idea of continental and French origins. British scholarship, like that of E.K. Chambers, was more likely to be interested in social custom and to deny French roots

drama" (12)

in favour of native growth and evidence of national character. These, of course, are generalizations, contradictions of which existed on both sides of the Atlantic.
Chapter Three
From Evolution to Revolution and Beyond: New Approaches and a New Edition

Since 1933 there have been huge changes in attitudes and critical approaches in the study of the early English religious plays. Interest has shifted from origins to the cycle itself, from strata of revision in the text to the social context in which it was performed, and the intellectual context within which it was effective. It has come to be seen not merely as pre-literature, or pre-Shakespeare, but as literature and drama in its own right. This chapter traces the development and outcome of these shifts, which began in the late 1950's. Studies in the York cycle were particularly affected by these changes because York had come to be a widely-used exemplar in its organization and staging, and because in 1951 York became the first of the cycles to be performed. There were a number of causes which contributed to these changes in viewpoint and methodology: performance and the increasing availability and use of civic and guild records are the most obvious. These are examined separately in chapters four and five. Perhaps more elusive and widespread was the gradual hardening of and the eventual challenge to the theory of evolution as the model of literary development. Although seemingly 'scientific', the model carried implicit suggestions and value judgements about the plays which were based in unstated, post-Reformation Protestant responses to their religious content: that they were 'primitive', mostly undramatic, valuable only in that they demonstrated the beginnings of the Shakespearean stage in their comical intrusions; or that they were 'corrupt' or 'impure' because they contained 'secular' intrusions of non-Biblical material; in either case, that they died off for artistic reasons, because the Elizabethan stage, a more 'advanced' species, evolved. This model did provide an easy way to teach the plays, a 'purely' literary approach which focussed on textual matters and avoided the complexities of 15th- and 16th-century cultural movements. As these implicit judgements came gradually to be questioned, the field became divided into camps which supported or challenged the evolutionary model, and when it became academically safe to challenge it, it appeared that a revolution, or metaphorically, a reformation, had occurred. The effective demolition of the traditional evolution-based structure of ideas about medieval drama was followed by a
variety of new approaches to the York plays. These may be divided roughly into camps which focussed on social, historical, contextual details, or on literary, textual understandings. Many of the new studies were based in attacks on the flaws of the older methodology; some turned to the evidence of art history or typological interpretation. Many concentrated their focus in detailed textual analysis of single plays; some examined the same episode across the cycles; few dared to tackle the whole cycle, or all four. Much of the critical scholarship since 1970 has examined the quality of "realism" which has troubled and stimulated students of the plays since their first publication. A controversy over the staging of the plays in the nineteen-seventies (which is discussed in Chapter Five) led to the intense re-examination of the textual evidence surrounding the plays, and finally to the publication of Richard Beadle's new edition of the cycle in 1982. It is my contention that although this revolution in approach appeared to happen very quickly, it was the final result of slow processes which were taking place throughout the first half of the twentieth century. This chapter explores the revolution and some of the critical approaches which followed, excluding the controversy around staging and records, and the effects of performance, which are examined in subsequent chapters.

Alongside Karl Young's great work, G.R. Owst's Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England also appeared in 1933. In a chapter titled "Sermon and Drama", Owst delineated the many resemblances between stock characters in the medieval preacher's repertoire, and those of the cycle plays, suggesting against the grain of current thought that the vernacular English plays drew heavily upon, and were shaped by the vernacular sermon tradition of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, rather than (or as well as) the early Latin liturgical dramas.

Familiar association of the religious drama in its earliest stages with the liturgy of the Church hitherto seems to have blinded most scholars to the fact that in the pulpits, for centuries, the sacred episodes had been declaimed with a freedom and dramatic intensity unknown to mere liturgical recitation..... Even then, if the sacred liturgy must still be held responsible for the birth of the drama, to the pulpit would be due its native development and popularization. (Owst 474, 479)

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Even the strains of 'comedy' and 'realism' in the cycles, which were often read as a sign of national development, could be attributed to the traditions of the sermon literature, neither national nor evolving:

Here then, we have clearly the fruits of that sermon Realism which our First Chapter revealed, a Realism indeed as widespread and international as the medieval pulpit itself, at least as ancient and original as the naive humour of Odo's Fables, or the plain speaking of a Jacques de Vitry... (Owst 479)

He argued that the evolutionary theory was erroneous because modern scholars had been deceived by the Tudor writer of the Chester Banms into attributing a false authorship and premature date to those plays. The reviewers, although interested, were mostly unconvinced: P.E.T. Widdrington² said "the reasons given by Sir Edmund Chambers for the transfer of the plays to the churchyard still seem to me sufficient" (Widdrington 341); and Howard R. Patch³ wrote "Dr. Owst goes too far in at least seeming to believe that the sermons can explain every medieval development: for example, that 'it was popular preaching... that brought about the secularization of the drama.'" (Patch 234)

The journal literature continued for a time to refine the perpetually interesting question of the relations of York and Towneley by examining smaller pieces of text under increasingly stringent criteria, one of the most powerful of which was the use of records. In 1934, Margaret Trusler⁴ dismissed Millicent Carey's⁵ theory that the York version of Cain and Abel was based on that of Towneley by arguing that handwriting did not equal authorship. She concluded that the York episode was written by a splicer of existing

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⁵Millicent Carey The Wakefield Group in the Towneley Cycle (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1930)
materials and suggested that York probably influenced Towneley.

In 1937, P.E. Dutoor\(^6\) pointed out that the MS of the Register contained two versions of the play of the Creation of Adam and Eve; Lucy Toulmin Smith had printed only the B version because it was textually superior; Dutoor supplied an edition of the A text, pointing out the more pronouncedly northern complexion of its language. Also in 1937, Mendel Frampton\(^7\) used the records supplied by Davies and Sellars to trace which guilds performed which versions of the Cain and Abel episode, and when. He concluded that the original was performed in 1415-1417; that John Clerk added two dissociated fragments to restore the lost play contained on two missing leaves in 1558; and that sometime between those dates it was borrowed in Wakefield and partially rewritten by the Wakefield Master. Marie Lyle's work was invoked by John Harrington Smith\(^8\) in 1938, when he further developed Frampton's ideas. Working within the paradigm of slow, evolutionary development, he found the Wakefield dates puzzling and concluded: "There is no time left for a 'primitive cycle' in which plays borrowed from York were gradually substituted. Professor Frampton's researches and mine... confirm Miss Lyle's theory of a start from a practically en bloc borrowing. I should put the date at about 1400." (John Harrington Smith 600)

In 1938 George Coffman pointed out some changes in methodology which he had observed in current studies of medieval literature:\(^9\)

One dominant interest among students of medieval literature at the turn of the century was a study of the origin of medieval types. Illustrations of this are the work of such scholars as Manly, Anz and Young in the religious drama... During the past fifteen years among Americans, there have been notable

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\(^7\)Mendel G. Frampton, "The Brewbarret Interpolation in the York Play of the Sacrificium Cayme and Abell" PMLA 52 (September 1937) 895-900.


efforts to suggest canons for the study of literary history, ... a more conscious attempt among literary historians to find the conditions which evoke an idea or form, cause it to persist and to adapt itself in pattern and spirit to changing conditions, through a long period. Recent emphasis has thus shifted from origins, to continuity, tradition and heritage... [the] realization that the English Renaissance owes as heavy a debt to the Middle Ages as to contemporary Italy and the classical past... to the claims of the native English tradition. (Coffman "Trends" 500-501)

This movement from origins to traditions became more obvious with time's passage, and was perhaps evident in other branches of medieval literary studies before it percolated into medieval drama studies. The increased focus on native, national traditions was probably related to nationalism engendered by the Second World War.

The increasing availability and use of records\(^1\) both aided and made necessary the transition which Coffman predicted from textually-based hypotheses of origins, to socially and historically-based reconstructions of actual events and traditions. This shift was also marked by an increase in self-awareness on the part of the academic community; the challenge to older theories began to be accompanied by a sense of the psychological framework which had produced those theories. This sense is apparent in one of the most important studies of the medieval drama to this point, Father Harold Gardiner's *Mysteries' End*\(^1\). Although it was published in 1946, the bulk of the research was performed before the war; the book was written during the war under the supervision of Karl Young. Gardiner argued that current dealings with the cycles were still influenced by Puritanism:

> the element of religious controversy, of polemical animosity which coloured the final years of the religious stage in its miracle and mystery plays, has not ceased to prejudice its memory ever since, so that we find even today a trace of Puritanism still hovering about the whole subject. (Gardiner xi)

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\(^{10}\)A series of extracts from the House Books was published by Angelo Raine in *York Civic Records* between 1939 and 1950 (Yorkshire Archeological Society, Records Series nos. 98, 103, 106, 108, 110, 112); the then-unpublished Chamberlain's Rolls and Books first received serious attention from Anna J. Mill in 1950.

The medieval religious drama ended because "a kindred tyranny [to Nazi Germany] throttled its particular freedom of speech" (Gardiner vii), and not because they were superseded by a more highly evolved form of drama. This attack on the end-point of the evolutionary approach challenged unstated Protestant prejudices about a theatre both secular and religious:

In our current secular age, when we abide faithfully by the dogma that religion belongs in church and should not be heard and seen on the highways, we may find it hard to realize how a religious drama could have been popular; at most we are prepared to grant that it did have a hold on the people only because they knew no other kind; when the secular drama burst on them, we imagine, they joyfully and spontaneously abandoned Abraham, Noah and the saints for Tamburlaine and Dido. (Gardiner 113)

This, he said "is a projection of our modern view back four hundred years." (Gardiner 113) By re-examining the records printed by Davies, Gardiner argued persuasively that the York cycle was a popular cultural event which was eventually demolished, not by the discontent of impoverished guilds or the appearance of classically influenced "renaissance drama" but by a carefully pursued royal policy of censorship. Despite his dissent with the end-point of the evolutionary theory, Gardiner did not challenge the beginning of the theory, the accepted hypothesis of the liturgical origins of the Corpus Christi plays.

The reception of the volume was mixed; one Catholic reviewer said

The work represents a type of scholarship which has long and strangely been wanting in Catholic circles... the most representative work on medieval drama has so far come from non-Catholic scholars... their vision of the medieval scene is often impaired by their inability to understand Catholic doctrines.12

Henry W. Wells13 took him severely to task for his "failure to understand that the robustious embellishment on Scriptural themes sincerely offended the Biblical-minded Protestants" and for his "narrowly legalistic and unphilosophical account" which "neglects to observe how fated was the decline of the old plays because of the rising tides of secularism, Realism, and

12Granger Ryan, rev. of Mysteries' End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Stage by Harold C. Gardiner, The Commonweal 44:196 (7 June 1946)

E.K. Chambers thought "his book is a useful survey, although I do not know that it tells us very much that is new." As late as 1951, Millett Henshaw echoed Wells: "he fails to see how much the decline owed to the rising tide of secularism, realism and the Renaissance." Gardiner's study has gradually assumed far greater importance than it had shortly after its publication; the idea that the plays were suppressed for their religious content has been so thoroughly accepted that its re-examination was not requested until 1980.

After the war and Gardiner's work, the shift of focus from beginnings to endings and from text to context became more pronounced. In 1950, Anna Mill relied heavily on research in the House Books and unpublished Chamberlains' Rolls to track the demise of the Marian plays. She dismissed Davies' idea that the Mary plays were generally not in favour as a group, which was based upon the discontinuance of the Fergus pageant and on Davies' own Protestant assumptions about the propriety of apocryphal material, arguing that


16Bills, Bing D. "The 'Suppression Theory' and the English Corpus Christi Play: A Re-Examination" Theatre Journal 32 (March 1980) 157-168. Bills argued that the plays were not extinguished by a consciously-developed plan on the part of the government but by a few noisy Puritans who were heard by sympathetic officials, concluding "Puritanism was only one factor, and a very late one at that, contributing to the final disappearance of the medieval cycle play." (167) The other factors were economic: "we find that the very years their plays were 'put aside', the towns were undertaking municipal projects, coping with poverty of craft and town, or with loss of industry." (159)


"The Assumption pageant and its appurtenances were still at this time [1486] a live and popular tradition." (Mill "Dying" 871) Her article explored the suppression of the plays along Gardiner's lines, but without his strident pro-Catholic bias, and her focus was social and historical, just as Coffman had predicted. C. Fenno Hoffman corrected Lucy Toulmin Smith on a point of attribution: the words of the musical passages in Play 46 "The Appearance of Our Lady to Thomas" came, not from an unidentified liturgical source, but from the Golden Legend.

A 1951 article by Jesse Byers Reese explored the versification of the York plays, and discovered that thirteen of them "are not just 'alliterated passages,' but alliterative verse" (Reese 666), not 'loose' or 'ragged' in form, but with "intricate requirements... stanzaic patterns... [and] devices of linking." (Reese 668) Reese focussed more on the problem of correcting critical perceptions about the quality of the writing than on determining layers of revision, going only so far as to suggest that those plays "using the same medium, the same devices... would certainly seem to be composed by one or more authors extremely skilled in the writing of alliterative verse." (Reese 668) The scholarship of the early fifties began to explore the period in which the plays were performed, moving gradually away from evolutionary origins and liturgy and toward endings and the vernacular.

This redirection of interest into contextual material also manifested itself in a linking of the drama with medieval art and architecture. This stream of thought was perhaps rooted

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20Jesse Byers Reese, "Alliterative Verse in the York Cycle" Studies in Philology 48:3 (July 1951) 639-668. This volume is titled Studies in Mediaeval Culture Dedicated to George Raleigh Coffman.

21Reese identified the following plays: I. Creation, Fall of Lucifer; XVI. Coming of the Three Kings; XXVI. Conspiracy to Take Jesus; XXVIII. Agony and Betrayal; XXIX. Peter Denies Jesus: Jesus Examined Before Caiaphas; XXX. Dream of Pilate's Wife: Jesus Before Pilate; XXXI. Trial Before Herod; XXXII. Second Accusation Before Pilate: Remorse of Judas; Purchase of the Field of Blood; XXXIII. Second Trial Continued: Judgement on Jesus; XXXVI. Mortificatio Cristi; XLVI. Appearance of Our Lady to Thomas; XL. Travellers to Emmaus; XLV. Death of Mary.
in the early productions of *Everyman*, which relied heavily on the "timeless" devotional quality of medieval art in order to create familiar and evocative pictures for its audience. In 1951 Waldo F. McNeir\(^2\) explored the dramatic qualities of the Passion sequences of all four cycles using an architectural metaphor:

> the cyclic Passion is like the middle span of three arches, rising highest of the three but flanked on either side by companion spans necessary to architectural unity; or it may be compared to the central panel of a triptych, a position in which it is often found in medieval art. (McNeir 603)

McNeir's article asked "How was it that pious medieval folk could endure the atrocities done to Jesus?" His solution was psychological:

> A deliberate heightening of situation may have the effect of anesthetizing the feelings and inducing a half-hypnotized absorption in the circumstantial interest of intolerable occurrences. It is this sort of dramatic relief that the painful details of the Crucifixion provide. (McNeir 623)

McNeir mentioned the 'upcoming' production of the York plays and was therefore reliant for his imaginative reconstruction of dramatic tensions upon pictorial art, rather than upon that momentous live performance.

Another strand of thought, which went back to Chambers' work on folk drama and ritual, dominated in A.P. Rossiter's *English Drama from the Earliest Times to the Elizabethans*\(^3\). Rossiter narrated a movement from pagan into Christian ritual which underlay and shaped the medieval plays, thus explaining their apparent aesthetic clash of broad design and homely detail.

> It was a secularized religious drama: in the vernacular: latterly in the hands of Craft Guilds: filled with much comedy and farce, especially in England; but the forces of RITUAL still direct it... The drama of the Church set out to Christianize humanity; the miracle-plays humanized Christianity. (Rossiter 53)

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\(^2\)Waldo F. McNeir, "The Corpus Christi Passion Plays as Dramatic Art" *Studies in Philology* 48:3 (July 1951) 601-628. This volume is titled *Studies in Medieval Culture Dedicated to George Coffman*.

\(^3\)A.P. Rossiter, *English Drama from Earliest Times to the Elizabethans* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950)
The materials of evolutionary theory and of the Cambridge anthropologists fitted together conveniently. Rossiter liked the York plays for their coarse comedy, suggesting that "the midwives were cut out of the Nativity for going too far", and that perhaps York once had much more of "the sort of thing" (Rossiter 67). His critical judgement of the texts was the by-now familiar and crushing

> From the literary point of view the workmanship is never far from crude, and in the older strata, insipid to a degree beyond Hymns Ancient and Modern at its tritest. (Rossiter 66)

One of the most popular varieties of formal criticism to be applied to the cycle plays was the use of typology. Northrop Frye's 1982 definition of the typological method of Biblical interpretation is a good one:

> Everything that happens in the Old Testament is a "type" or adumbration of something that happens in the New Testament.... What happens in the New Testament constitutes an "antitype," a realized form of something foreshadowed in the Old Testament. (Frye 79)

This kind of reading provided an understanding of history which was both vertically and horizontally located, in the forward movement of time, and in the revolutionary hope for the end of time. Typology has been employed since the late nineteen fifties to decode literary works heavily indebted to Christianity, particularly works of medieval literature. It was popularized as a literary tool by Eric Auerbach24, who clarified the expansion of the word \figura\, a term often used interchangeably with "type" as

> the dominant view in the European Middle Ages: the idea that earthly life is thoroughly real, but that with all its reality it is only \umbra\ or \figura\ of the authentic, future, ultimate truth, the real reality that will unveil and preserve the \figura\. (Auerbach "Figura" 72)

Auerbach opened the way for more specific examinations of the use of typology in the medieval plays:

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figural representation changed the Old Testament from a book of laws and a history of the people of Israel into a series of figures of Christ and the Redemption such as we find later in the procession of prophets in the medieval theatre... (Auerbach "Figura" 52, italics mine)

The Eucharist, as the basic idea behind the Feast of Corpus Christi, provided the ultimate example of a figure:

This sacrament, which is figure as well as symbol, and which has long existed historically - namely since it was first established in the old covenant - gives us the purest picture of the concretely present, the veiled and tentative, the eternal and supratemporal elements contained in the figures. (Auerbach "Figura" 60)

The connection with the liturgy thus provided medieval drama and indeed all of medieval art with an underlying hidden truth, the Christian message of redemption:

Everything in the dramatic play which grew out of the liturgy during the Middle Ages is part of one- and always the same context: of one great drama whose beginning is God's creation of the world, whose climax is Christ's Incarnation and Passion, and whose expected conclusion will be Christ's second coming and Last Judgement. (Auerbach Mimesis 137)

Writing about the twelfth-century Jeu d'Adam, Auerbach found that the drama provided the connection between detached interpretive technique and the realities of everyday existence:

... all the heights and depths of human conduct and all the heights and depths of stylistic expression find their morally or aesthetically established right to exist; and hence there is no basis for a separation of the sublime from the low and everyday, for they are indissolubly connected with Christ's very life and suffering. Nor is there any basis for concern for the unities of time, place or action, for there is but one place - the world; and but one action - man's fall and redemption.... here there is a movement... from distant legend and its figural interpretation into everyday contemporary reality. (Auerbach Mimesis 13)

Typological interpretation, based in traditional Christian exegesis, was an attractive methodology because it took the religious content of the Corpus Christi plays seriously, and yet offered an almost clinically detached way to explain it, and because it carried the authority of the long tradition of scholasticism. If this was how the medieval scholars had understood their own literature, it must be the correct way to understand it now.

In 1955, after 22 years of fairly sparse scholarship on the plays and the first public
performances of the whole York cycle, Hardin Craig published *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages*, a textbook compendium of available information. Heavily reliant on the works of Young and Chambers, Craig's approach to the cycle plays was that they were primarily religious, and that they evolved. This idea was beyond challenge: "How and why they did this we do not know with any great definiteness. They were liturgical and they became secular; this fact is obvious and needs no proof." (Craig *English Religious Drama* 88) Craig's devotion to this idea was itself religious: "We may believe then, that the Corpus Christi play was set up, probably on the model of an inclusive dramatic form invented on the Continent.... [The] theory of the development of the mystery plays from pantomime... is possibly an ineradicable heresy." (Craig *English Religious Drama* 133, 134 italics mine) Because Young's organizing work had found plays in all stages of "development" at various historical points, Craig was forced to propose the principle of "independence of chronology that characterizes religious drama as a whole" (Craig *English Religious Drama* 55), which permitted him to disregard MS dates. Regarding York, he argued that the Shrewsbury fragments preserved a portion of a much older, evolving and liturgical version of the York cycle, which "was initially composed from the following existing plays: *Pastores*, probably a *Stella, Quem Queritis, Hortulanus*, and a *Peregrini*." (Craig *English Religious Drama* 210-211) Craig also revived the theory of Marie Lyle (who was, after all, his doctoral student) to argue that the existing York and Towneley texts sprang from one identical source play, and that either text might provide the more accurate reading, depending upon metrics, and he argued for the antiquity of the Chester cycle. (Craig *English Religious Drama* 214-218) The York text itself, he argued, had undergone a long series of revisions:

Sometime in the early fourteenth century, the York authorities... got together their simple plays, put them in the Corpus Christi procession... [added] the play of the Last Judgement [as] suggested or imitated from the Chester cycle.... One of the first things done... was the rewriting of the Resurrection group in the Burns stanza on the basis of the Northern Passion. Also, probably very early since the Passion is a necessary subject, came a grand revision, possibly a new composition of a Passion group, this also done in

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close conformity with the *Northern Passion*... [The] plays composed in the Northern Septenar stanza point to a clearly marked set of revisions... before the Wakefield cycle was separately established and after the main series of revisions based on the *Northern Passion*... Much of the material for these revisions came from the poetical *Gospel of Nicodemus*... probably after the middle of the fourteenth century.... [Then] an extensive rewriting of fourteen plays in alliterative verse in connexion... with the alliterative style centring in the last half of the fourteenth century. (Craig *English Religious Drama* 235-238)

Craig's appraisal of the plays left little room for the possibility of art; they were religious and must be so understood: "one might concede to them skill in a kind of poetry excellent in its expression of the temper of an age." (Craig *English Religious Drama* 238) He was disinterested in the pursuit of comic moments as a link either backward to pagan ritual, or forward to the Renaissance; this, he said, is the wrong way to read the plays. Of the age itself, he was less tolerant: "we have to do with the conservatism and slow perfectionism of the Middle Ages. It need not disturb us too much if we find that these efforts towards perfection were often extremely ill-judged." (Craig *English Religious Drama* 18)

Naturally, Craig's understanding of the end of the mystery plays was opposed to that of Gardiner; although he began by saying "There is no doubt that Father Harold C. Gardiner, S.J., is right in his contention that Reform was the chief enemy of the mystery plays", he quickly softened the idea by arguing for the superior dramatic forms of the Renaissance: "There must have been some defection... from the traditional mystery and miracle plays because of the introduction by the Renaissance of the finer dramatic art of... Terence and Plautus, and... Seneca." The evidence of popular support for the Corpus Christi plays in York and Chester was thus simply evidence that "in such places, the Middle Ages were slow in 'waning'". (Craig *English Religious Drama* 354-355) The mysteries, he argued, "were medieval in their essence and the Middle Ages were passing away.... A good many of them seem to have died out of themselves, and that death was no doubt no great cause of grief to those who took the Protestant side." (Craig *English Religious Drama* 363) The quality which he did find admirable in the religious drama was moral earnestness, which then passed to the Renaissance and became a distinguishing characteristic of the English race:

"It is not a matter of the formal and often thin thing called literary influence"
that makes Macbeth remind one of Everyman, but a community of race and purpose that found expression in the drama of two different though still closely connected ages.

Craig's Anglophile and Protestant biases formed the underpinnings of his approach to the plays: his dogmatic belief in progress and advancement, his reliance on controllable textual analysis, rather than upon the apparently chaotic historical evidence of chronologically diverse records and his insistence on the *religious* quality of the plays provided a closed and final reading of the texts. Although his references were up-to-date, he never once mentioned modern performance. The book did provide two tools for the field: a standard work, and an honest delineation of the logical leaps which were necessary in order to believe it. The critical approach to Craig's work, especially during the 1970's and 1980's has been consistently to dismantle it; yet, it is worth noticing that his work gave the field a tremendous boost by attacking the old prejudice in favour of comical fragments, demanding instead that the plays be taken as a whole, as religious art. Unintentionally, he provided the next generation of scholars with a set of ideas against which to rebel. By crystallizing the ideas of the first half of the century into an academic dogma, Craig ironically forced the field wide open - one had to either subscribe or disprove, and much of the tremendous growth which followed was directed toward the latter.

The beginnings of this movement may be located in the work of F.M. Salter. Since Craig's chronology of the York cycle's development depended on the status of Chester as the oldest of the cycles, Salter's work affected York studies. The product of the 1954 Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto, Salter's volume on Chester questioned several of the assumptions which had at this point become fundamental: Chester's status as the oldest of the cycles, the attribution of authorship to Ranulf Higden, and the reliability of the Rogers' description of the wagons. By examining William Newhall's 1532 Proclamation, Salter demonstrated that previously uncommented deletions and corrections in the text indicated that

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with the disestablishment of the Church of Rome, the civic officials became anxious to remove from the Plays which ministered to the prosperity of their city any odour of Roman Catholicism. In 1532 or 1540 the plays were removed from the jurisdiction of "this monastery dissolved" and taken over by the Town Hall. What could be more reasonable than to ascribe them to the man whom all the local antiquaries of the sixteenth century honoured as the first Mayor of Chester? It would seem that Arneway first came into the picture at this point. (Salter 36)

Salter went further, tracing Higden's association as 'author' of the plays to 1575, when the Late Banns "turn Higden into a stalwart champion of Protestantism against Rome"; having eliminated both Arneway and Higden, he was left with:

the simple statement in the Proclamation which William Newhall revised in 1532, that the plays were 'devised and made by Sir Henry Francis.'... they come into being at the very time when we have our earliest references to mystery plays elsewhere. (Salter 41-42)

Salter dated the plays in 1375 at the earliest, and well aware of the relation of his position to the weight of contemporary opinion, continued

It will seem to many in this audience I am trying to shake the foundations of a fabric of knowledge of the mystery plays of England carefully built up by generations of excellent scholars. Well, one good turn deserves another: let me hurl another brick. (Salter 42)

This second 'brick' was the idea that the plays were never 'secularized' or divorced from the Church - they continued to be controlled by the Church through religious guilds and abbeys, and were a form of Church propaganda, of "religious folk drama". Despite their commercial value to the towns, and despite efforts by the townsmen to 'cleanse' them of the 'taint of Rome', they were inevitably extinguished by the Reformation. This 'taint' was not a negative value for Salter; going back to Ruskin's ideas, he praised the religious fabric of medieval society as a place which was "spacious and hospitable enough to include all the elements of human life." (Salter 52)

Much of the positive light in which Salter read the plays was derived from "his humane interest in people as unexpected sources of art." Unlike Rossiter, he argued

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27 Personal communication with Professor Joanna Dutka, Salter's last student.
strenuously that the plays were not silly or amateurish. "The real duty of criticism is not to brush them aside as crude and childish, but to ask what there was in them that could appeal to sane and sensible men in a civilized country for more than two hundred years." (Salter 83)

They were unlike the work of Chaucer, he argued, because

they are the products of folk artistry - and the folk are artists... they still come to us encrusted with the living and thinking of real people... Hereafter was immediate and important to them, and religion was their daily bread... There is another England that looms large and comparatively neglected in the ballads and mystery plays. This is an England clustered closely around the hospitable and all-inclusive Church. (Salter 101-102)

Salter's use of the records highlighted the fact that the productions of the plays were expensive, carefully-planned and involved large numbers of people. By shifting the emphasis from evolutionary delineation of literary forms to the appreciation of dramatic qualities in the plays which emphasized an attractive vision of a specific time and place in 'Merrie England', Salter provided a radically new way and reason to study the cycle plays.

The implications of Gardiner's and Salter's research were taken up by Glynne Wickham, who explored the spectacular staging of the medieval plays by means of parallels with court pageantry, jousting and the indoor entertainments of minstrels in Early English Stages. Wickham attacked what he characterized as 'Victorian scholarship':

It is becoming increasingly clear that for some four hundred years we have been the dupes of Puritan bigotry where the medieval religious stage is concerned. (Wickham 8)

and demanded a general reappraisal of the middle ages as sophisticated and mature, and of the plays as large-scale, expensive and carefully-organized productions, rather than as deficient literary texts. Wickham's reappraisal came out of a post-war view of human history; progress was no longer linear and positive, but ran in "repeated cyclic patterns of growth, fruition and decay." (Wickham 7) Wickham believed that a 'new perspective' was in order, and he re-evaluated the evolutionary theory which Craig propounded in the light of Salter's work on Chester to argue that the vernacular cycle plays came into being in the

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28Glynne Wickham, Early English Stages (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959; republished with corrections 1963) All quotations are from volume one: 1300 - 1660 (1963)
late fourteenth century from existing Latin cycles which the regular clergy could no longer perform, due to the size of the plays and the decimation of the Black Death, and that the Church held intellectual control of the plays until the end; he argued that the conventions of civic pageants and tournaments contributed to their sumptuous staging techniques, and that the typical playing space was a *locus* and *platea*, of which the pageant wagon was simply the adaptation of a few specific towns, rather than the rule for drama in England. His new perspective was general and often hypothetical rather than specific and textual; he often drew on the visual sources of continental records. He focussed on Chester rather than York as exemplar, and was much more interested in the staging of the plays than in their poetical texts. Most of all he took issue with the idea that the English medieval plays were in any way childish.

The issues of religion and of how to address the religious content of the plays were addressed by Eleanor Prosser\(^\text{29}\) in 1961. Beginning with the thesis that "no clear-cut standard" of evaluation of the "religious drama *qua* religious drama... has been agreed upon" (Prosser 7), she asked "Why have we not valued the mysteries to the degree that they fulfilled their purpose as religious drama?" (Prosser 11), answering her own question, "Modern man is simply not Christian in the way that medieval man was." (Prosser 12) Her solution was a "two-fold approach, based on a knowledge of religion and an imaginative identification with the audience attending the plays." (Prosser 15) Her formalist appraisal approached individual episodes as separate plays, which sought out theme, conflict resolution, plot, and characterization, rather than poetry or realism and evaluated each episode on the basis of how well-developed these aspects were, and how effectively the episode fulfilled its function as religious drama.

Jerome Taylor\(^\text{30}\) discussed the Feast of Corpus Christi as a unifying structure of the

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Corpus Christi plays, proposing that

correspondences [are] rooted in a common intention to commemorate the wonders by which the Divine King reintegrates the creaturely kingdom disobedient to his law.... the history of these wonders can be considered as the unifying action of the cycle plays. (Taylor "Structure" 156)

Religion should not be considered as an impediment to the dramatic qualities of the plays, but as the foundation within which were contained the inherently dramatic attributes of plot and historical development, and which provided them with 'unity'.

The ideas of Chambers, Young and Craig were addressed by O.B. Hardison\(^3\) in 1965. At this point, the focus of interest in the medieval plays had already shifted to the study of their staging and dramatic effectiveness although the idea that the Corpus Christi plays were the descendants of liturgical tropes was still taught. Hardison examined the nineteenth-century assumptions which formed the underpinnings of the Darwinian approach to literature, calling for the recognition that the works of Chambers and Young are "more than anthologies of facts.... They are the product of a particular moment... which encouraged the belief that one approach to literature is correct and that others are either wrong or trivial."

(Hardison 2) Hardison examined the intellectual background of Chambers' "objective" social and historical approach, pointing out that it provided a shaky argument riddled with philosophical contradictions and a thin disguise for a Victorian discomfort with religion:

In retrospect, *The Medieval Stage* is a composite of the often contradictory ideas shaping nineteenth-century historical scholarship. It is a triumph of the effort to collect documentary facts, but many of the facts are, by common agreement, tangential. It is strongly influenced by the analogy between biological and literary evolution, but the evolutionary hypothesis is contradicted by Chambers' sense of the Renaissance as an antithesis to medieval culture, and weakened in respect to medieval drama by the impossibility of establishing a chronology of the movement from *Quem Queritis* to Corpus Christi cycle. It attempts to understand the social and economic milieu of medieval drama, but it is affected by anti-clericalism to such a degree that the dramatic elements in religious drama are treated as a rebellion against religion, rather than as attempts to express it. Finally, its definition of drama is inadequate. (Hardison 18)

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\(^3\)O.B. Hardison, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965)
Arthur Heiserman's review\textsuperscript{32} of Hardison's volume made it clear how profoundly felt was this challenge to the traditional views:

With magisterial erudition, Hardison shows how the great works of Chambers, Young and Craig grew from late nineteenth-century analogies between biological and literary species, how anti-clericalism warped their conceptions of liturgy and drama and how such presumptions led to the misreading of plain evidence. I know of no more salutary appraisal of the giant-race of philologists to whom current medieval studies owes its existence. (Heiserman 242)

Literary studies of the Corpus Christi plays were also profoundly affected by Brecht's vision of epic theatre\textsuperscript{33}. The scholar who most thoroughly assimilated Brecht's ideas into medieval drama studies was V.A. Kolve.\textsuperscript{34} He did so by examining and redefining the genre of the Corpus Christi play as game, a meaning included in the term \textit{ludus}. This genre of drama was different in kind from the drama of the western European tradition, which he identified with Brecht as the 'theatre of illusion'; while the \textit{ludus} never sought to hide its theatrical quality, it behaved according to its own rules, the rules of the game world:

it "imaged" sacred personae of the highest importance to man, and it sought to instruct in matters central to the salvation of souls: it was considered profitable game.... Like all play, this drama depended on formal order, without which, progress within a game and pleasure from a game are alike impossible.... Today, playwrights like Brecht, Ionesco, and Beckett have gone back to this older idea of theatre or have worked in terms consonant with it. But the cycles can give us the thing itself in its first flowering, and if we would read them, stage them and understand them properly, we must learn first of all to respond to the game nature of their action. (Kolve 20, 23)

Thus understood, the Corpus Christi plays re-enacted the whole game of human history. The object of the game was salvation and the overall movement was comic rather than tragic. The problematic points (those which had already generated the greatest amount of criticism

\textsuperscript{32}Arthur Heiserman, rev. of \textit{Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages} by O.B. Hardison. \textit{Modern Philology} 65 (1967-68) 241-244.

\textsuperscript{33}See Chapter Four for further discussion of Brecht's influence.

\textsuperscript{34}V.A. Kolve, \textit{The Play Called Corpus Christi} (California: Stanford University Press, 1966)
and explanation) - the comic aspects of the Noah and Nativity stories, and the brutality of the Passion sequences - were those in which the ludic quality was most apparent. A re-evaluation on this scale of the way the drama worked also necessitated a re-envisioning of human nature, good and evil. Of evil, Kolve said:

Christ came to die for Adam's sin, and the legacy of Adam to his descendants - man's fallen nature.... Natural man - not Pilate and not Satan - is ultimately guilty of Christ's death.... they [the cycles] are rooted in the place where all explanations must start, in our metaphysical identity *ni l'ange ni bête.* (Kolve 234-236)

Of good in human nature, he said:

The good men, like the evil, live in society, are self-engrossed and busy with affairs.... Humankind is a single estate, defined by the instincts and limitations of a fallen nature.... The ultimate value of the good is obedience, and later, charity; whatever their initial instinct, in the end they bend themselves to God's will, and though they remain categorically separate from Him, in the end they become His good and chosen servants. (Kolve 264)

Within this concept of game, Kolve's method drew upon all four of the cycles, and where appropriate, the other medieval plays and contemporary works of religious instruction and meditation, most in the vernacular; Kolve did not see the plays or their audiences as "simple", but as diverse - he therefore postulated a range of educational backgrounds and responses.

The effect of Kolve's work was gradual and profound. By providing a formal reading of the themes of game and Corpus Christi, he provided a model of discourse oriented toward the goal of understanding the plays within their extant texts and recorded historical contexts. The old questions of evolution and kinship were referred to the festival of Corpus Christi itself: by implication, the plays were the product of good weather and a new festival, in the hands of the guilds from their inception - what was recorded was discussed, but Kolve allowed the historical lacunae of the documentation of these propositions simply to stand: "Somehow the cycles took form, and the form they took was determined by the facts we have been examining." (Kolve 49)

Chaucerian studies were heavily influenced during the 1960s and '70s by the work
of D.W. Robertson, who infused a strong Augustinian sense of spirituality into his readings. He argued that medieval literature, the product of a culture which held a figurative and allegorical view of existence, should be understood in accord with this view, in which the superficial sensual delight of art is to be read as a means to salvation: "this does not mean, however, that art could not be moving on the surface; it means that whatever surface delight it involves should be referred to another end." (Robertson 63) The work of Hardin Craig may be understood in this context; as well as that of the numerous scholars who traced the inclusion of various Old Testament episodes in the cycles to their figurative connections with those of the New Testament.

Arnold Williams (a former student of George Coffman) examined the practice of typological interpretation of the cycle plays in 1968. Williams argued that explications of typology were useful only insofar as they enhanced understanding of the plays' *dramatic* potential:

To a literary critic, the fundamental question must always be whether the imagery enhances the dramatic impact, whether the sermon is good theatre, whether the typology functions under the conditions which govern any play produced by actors on a stage. (Williams "Typology" 677)

He pointed out that the use of typology originated in Chaucerian interpretations, and argued that its extension to other periods and genres brought a decrease in its validity, suggesting some criteria for its applicability:

What can typological exegesis tell us about the cycle plays? How shall we use it? What are its limitations? How closely can anyone read a dramatic text, which was not originally intended for reading but for seeing and hearing? (Williams "Typology" 679)

Because the plays were originally meant to be performed rather than read, any viable typology had to be intelligibly conveyable from the stage. Interestingly, Williams used the

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effects achievable in *twentieth-century* staging to determine intelligible conveyance. He examined recent typological treatments of the Abraham and Isaac plays and the Shepherd plays, which had been the most thoroughly subjected to this method. He concluded that "the use of typology produces bad theatre" (Williams "Typology" 683); that the plays had tended to develop from typological interpretation in their sources, but to move gradually toward "the most dramatic way of stating the scriptural story." (Williams "Typology" 684) Nevertheless, typological interpretations of various episodes continued to appear periodically (see Leiter 1968-69 and Grove 1974, discussed below).

In 1969, David Mills37 published an examination of the shifts in critical approaches occurring in medieval drama. Mills separated the work in the field into three camps, the 'liturgical' approach, the 'literary' approach and the 'dramatic' approach, and criticized all three for their use of modern critical terminology, warning that

the application of these terms, with all their modern connotations, to medieval dramatic activities, may lead critics to dwell upon certain aspects of these activities, to the exclusion of other important features, and may suggest a degree of continuity between medieval and modern play-construction which is unhelpful or even misleading. (Mills 48)

In the case of each camp, Mills examined "what the familiar terms signify when applied to medieval drama." (Mills 48) He criticized the 'liturgical' approach for its unwarranted emphasis on a single continuous process of development, concluding with an appeal for the cycles to be "approached as self-sufficient dramatic forms with their own thematic and structural unity." (Mills 51) The 'literary' camp, as represented by Kolve and Prosser, was criticized for its supposition of "the primacy of structure resulting from concentration upon a particular theme" (Mills 51), which resulted in "an attempt to project a modern concept of structural unity upon a medieval form which can just as readily be approached from a different standpoint." (Mills 52) This standpoint was apparently located in the 'dramatic' approach, which sought to reconcile the "discrepancy between doctrinal purpose and naturalistic effect." (Mills 56) He concluded that "this co-existence of naturalism and

doctrine is inseparable from the nature of the Corpus Christi plays themselves" (Mills 57) and recommended, rather than reconciliation, an emphasis on the "tension between tone and doctrine" (Mills 57) and the interplay between the two as an antidote for the "new concern with artistic unity which the Renaissance brings into England" (Mills 60).

It is important to note that activity regarding the York plays was taking place concurrently around the themes of performance, staging, and records, areas which are more thoroughly discussed in Chapters four and five. The journal literature not immediately concerned with these areas made movements in a variety of directions: typological, social, historical, formal, and mainly contextual.

Louis Leiter applied typology to the Creation of Adam and Eve play, finding it marked by "repetition of well-known phrases from significant passages of the Bible, and [the] use of repeated imagery that often represents Biblical metaphor, or that metaphor fully developed by patristic commentators." These devices acquired meaning through accretion, which made the text more comprehensible in symbolic than in naturalistic ways. Leiter concluded "what at first looks thin, obvious, open, may, when examined from these points of view, begin to quiver with a vitality and resonance." (Leiter 129)

In 1969 Arthur Brown produced a commentary on the published records of York, calling for a more contextualized understanding of the plays in relation to the city which produced them:

... we should not forget that the whole business had little or nothing to do with 'closet drama' or a 'coterie drama' or 'art for art's sake'. It was part of the very life blood of York, a civic activity depending for its existence on the tradesmen who financed and produced it year after year.... It was intimately bound up with bigger events, political and religious changes, visitations of the plague.... never since in England have we had a drama which was linked so closely and in every possible way with the life of the city around it. (Brown 417-418)


This study was strictly limited to the records and did not indulge in the practice of relating the records to the plays.

Donald S. McClure\(^4\) explored the symbolic and commercial relations between pageants and their assigned guilds. J.W. Robinson\(^4\) produced a source study of the Nativity pageant which traced the influence of the iconography of St. Birgitta, concluding

It is clear that the York play is unique among extant Nativity plays in skilfully substituting material from the meditative versions of the Nativity for material from the legendary versions, and that the play becomes in the process an intelligent and shapely piece of work. (Robinson 254)

Caroline Wall\(^4\) examined the source of the music recorded in the play "The Appearance of Our Lady to Thomas", and proposed that the Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine provided the words to the songs, although it did not provide the source material of the play text. The songs were transcribed in modern notation and published with the article, with the conclusion that the play had been generally under-appreciated. Robert Brawer\(^4\) analyzed the character of Pilate in plays XXIV, XXX, XXXII, XXXIII, XXXVI and XXXVIII, and produced a close reading which argued that the character was the product of unified authorial intent, rather than of several contradictory redactions. Pilate was the complex representative of secular authority - shrewd, self-serving and astute - "both the object of satire and the agent of satire directed against those whose worldly arguments against Christ rebound on them and reveal their folly." (Brawer 296) Thomas Grove\(^4\) published an extremely formalist


comparative examination of the York and Chester Harrowing of Hell episodes, concluding that the York play "provides its audience with a comic overview - a divine perspective through which to view the entire drama... comic images of light and solace." (Grove 115) Grove's excessively fine-toothed analysis extended even to the verse structure of the York play, which he claimed predicted the overall form of the episode, or perhaps even of the whole cycle:

The 12-line rhyme-scheme contains an 8-line alternation between a and b, concluding with ccdc. The scheme could be interpreted two ways. Jesus could be represented by a and Satan by b, and the prophets and Michael as c and d. The 8-line confrontation might then suggest the central confrontation of the drama, with the brilliantly subtle prediction that the drama will end before the play does and that the play will finally focus upon different elements than a and b's alternation.... On the other hand, the scheme may pronounce the true eternal relationship between the figures of the drama, rather than a temporary progression within the drama of the harrowing. Thus, a would be Jesus, b the limbo-dwellers, c and d Satan and his cohorts. In this interpretation, the strength of a and b over c and d, which one could hear continuously throughout the drama, would signify the final dominance and victory of good over evil - exactly what the dramatic action signifies. (Grove 125)

In his introduction to the 1972 anthology Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual, Jerome Taylor45 addressed the issue of how the medieval drama might be critically approached without invoking the causal-developmental ideals of evolutionary theory:

It is not a story of change, but the record of changes made.... constant in its application of a single systematic analysis, it compares the analyzed constituents of finished products of art, and it leaves.... all inquiry into the productive process. The products may be classified according to likenesses and differences in respects consistently defined and in the simplicity or complexity.... with which they manifest them.... no exchange of influence, even were chronological pinpointing possible, can generally be more than guessed. Not some story of how they developed, but the story that they developed, the descriptive charting of definitive points of change, is a

sufficiently graphic aim for histories of medieval English drama. (Taylor 16-17)

This form of analysis searched for likeness and difference through the use of definition and description; its focus was specific and individual, rather than generalizing and holistic. The essays of the Taylor and Nelson anthology, the first to be devoted exclusively to medieval drama, dealt with various points on the chronological spectrum from liturgical drama to morality, but none attempted anything approaching synthesis. Several were examinations of the contextual background of all the Middle English examples of one sort of play: John Elliott analyzed the sacrifice of Isaac and Alan Nelson the Temptation of Christ. David J. Leigh found in the Doomsday plays a precursor of the moralities. J. W. Robinson examined the eight Passion plays of the York cycle which Charles Gayley attributed to the York Realist in order to define his 'realism'. He found that the York Realist's work was distinguished by extraordinary attention to detail for consistent development of plot and character, and therefore that the term is a misnomer:

He is, in fact, more of a naturalistic playwright than a realist... His Christ is also crowned with thorns (inevitably) - but even here, his special kind of realism seems to show itself; for after the crown has been stuck onto Christ's head there seems to be a pause before the blood begins to appear (XXXIII, 399-402) - no other medieval English dramatist cared about details like that.

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His 'realism' was not simply a matter of show-all stage convention; it was defined by subtle detail, careful attention to plot continuity and suggestive irony.

In 1972 Rosemary Woolf's *The English Mystery Plays* re-examined the Latin liturgical drama and argued against a direct connection with the English cycle drama, calling its influence "negligible in that it is only in trivial instances that the mystery plays draw upon the drama as a direct source". Her argument had two main points of focus:

Liturgical drama never left the Church, but co-existed with the mystery plays almost throughout their lifetime.... there was no steady evolutionary growth in liturgical drama towards an ever higher degree of representationalism, this growth reaching its fullness in the fourteenth century when the mystery plays were first composed. (Woolf 3)

She argued instead that the development of the Corpus Christi cycles was probably more related to the climate of England and to the break with liturgical time, and that the plays became attracted temporarily to the Corpus Christi procession, as a teaching tool for a "propagandist ceremony" (Woolf 72), breaking away later to more convenient parts of the year and taking only the name of Corpus Christi to record their association with the celebration. She noted the difficulties of processional performance without naming Nelson or Stevens (see chapter five). She argued that the processional form of performance must have been derived from the procession itself, and that this was only a temporary bond due to the difficulties of combining play and procession, one which left only its name to record the association. The bulk of Woolf's work was a play-by-play comparison of the four cycles. This approach emphasized the literary qualities of each episode and de-emphasized the overall characteristics of each cycle. In York she found a lot to praise: the God of the Creation successfully embodied the splendour of thought in verse which the portrayal of omnipotence required; the theological "theory that Satan rejected his status as creature leads in the York play to a more subdued and subtler style.... What is so acutely presented in

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logical argument by St. Thomas is here most deftly and imaginatively translated into literature." (Woolf 108-109) The Last Judgement was troubling, a theme ordinarily presented as sorrowful in sermons juxtaposed with a joyous celebration;

York alone movingly depicts the restoration of a serene relationship between Christ and the saved, which in structural terms is more important than the condemnation of the damned. The equipoise of York is perfect. (Woolf 299)

This analysis was precise and careful to avoid generalizations. In the end, she criticized former approaches which had tended to reductively and destructively seek out the seams in the text; like the Canterbury Tales, the variety of styles and "felicitous conjunctions that are haphazard beauties" in York provided a text "dramatically fine, so various in style and metre and so indisputably the product of multiple authorship." (Woolf 305) Woolf found in the increased rigidity of the (later) Chester cycle the signs of a literary tradition grown moribund: the end of the cycles, she argued, was due to the changing temper of the times. This Protestant temper had also marked early scholarship in the field, such as that of E.K. Chambers:

To any educated man in the second half of the sixteenth century they could only have seemed barbaric relics of an earlier ignorant age, provincial, shapeless and naïve. What the reformers destroyed was therefore productions of a moribund literary form, which, though still cherished by local townspeople, no longer had any standing amongst the learned and the literary who formerly had written them, nor amongst the royal and aristocratic who had earlier been amongst their audience. It is only nowadays that it is possible to look at the plays with unbiased eyes and judge them in their own terms. (Woolf 323)

Woolf's work examined the plays against each other and against the backdrop of contemporaneous sources provided by continental records of plays, art, theology; the culture of their own times. Her approach was consciously directed to the task of finding a mode of formal discourse which was not evolutionary, generalized, or marked with undiscovered Protestant biases, and her solution to these problems was in the specific comparison of play with play across the cycles.

By 1973, revisionist scholarship on the Corpus Christi plays had changed enough in
focus, methods and opinion that Stanley Kahrl\textsuperscript{51} produced a guide to it, which opened with the announcement that "the term pre-Shakespearean drama is best buried once and for all." (Kahrl 237) Kahrl examined the process by which the old assumptions about the cycle plays and how they might be studied had fallen, "the process of revaluation of a relatively neglected corpus of medieval literature undertaken at long last by medievalists who valued that corpus in itself, rather than as a prelude to something else." (Kahrl 238) He observed that in recent studies, the evolutionary connection with the Latin liturgical drama and the justification for study that they were the primitive forbears of the English Renaissance stage had given way to an increased appreciation of the plays as drama.

Kahrl's outline of academic history turned into a book\textsuperscript{52} in 1974. Having demonstrated that nearly all of the hypotheses of the first generation of scholarship in medieval drama were based on unexamined assumptions, he set out to develop a set of criteria of judgement which were based on the "actual conventions of the medieval dramatists themselves." (Kahrl 26) He divided staging matters into two formats, the place-and-scaffold tradition of East Anglia, which was influenced by France, and the station-to-station wagon format of York and Chester; understanding each play was partly a matter of understanding the convention for which it was written. "one criterion for judging the effectiveness... is the degree to which it realizes the potentialities of the stage for which that particular play was written." (Kahrl 58) The shape and scope of the plays were thus causally related to the format in which they were performed: "when the choice made is for a self-contained, coherent single dramatic incident, the wagon stage comes into its own." (Kahrl 70)

Kahrl's second great contribution in this volume was his discussion of realism and verisimilitude. He pointed out that "the term 'realism' was most often used to describe the comic or violent elements" (Kahrl 72), and that this definition of realism was based on the Realist school of literature, which appeared around 1859, when Darwin's \textit{Origin of Species}


\textsuperscript{52}Stanley Kahrl, \textit{Traditions of Medieval English Drama} (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1974)
was published. For this school,

realism represented a break with the Romantic era, and is characterized by an insistence that the writer’s task was to record the data of sense impressions verifiable in common experience, as the only reality which can be known. Throughout its history, 'Realism' has been associated with theories of human development which stress the effect on mankind of implacable laws of this world, whether of Nature or society, as opposed to literature which adheres to a belief in the operation of the laws of a transcendant God. (Kahlr 75)

Thus the use of violence and comedy had been critically interpreted as either a sign of the advancing evolution of the dramatic form (as in Gayley’s work), or (as in Rossiter and Kolve) as ritual elements. Kahlr proposed a method of evaluation based upon performance, in which what is sought is the audience’s ability to resolve the conflict between deep religious feeling and the verisimilitude of satire as the play’s action unfolds. (Kahlr 75) The criterion for dealing with these troublesome elements, which raised debates about the basic nature of humanity, was "not the fact that the brutality of humanity is portrayed, but whether or not that portrayal is necessary to the theme and structure of the play in which it appears." (Kahlr 83-84) Since the 'reality' of the modern critic differed from that of the medieval audience, Kahlr proposed the use of the more technical and emotionally detached term 'verisimilitude' for the description of violence and comedy.

Clifford Davidson⁵² began a long and fruitful publishing career dedicated to propagating the use of art history as a source of iconographic comparisons in 1974. His article linked the early fifteenth century movement toward a more realistic, humanized iconography of Christ’s passion with the work of the York Realist, whose plays were added at some point around 1425.

It is surely significant that the York Realist’s work was done at a time when civic concern in York and elsewhere was focussed on the adornment of churches and the endowment of chantry. (Davidson "Civic Concern" 126)

Davidson argued that the realism of the plays, often criticized by early scholars for their brutal intensity, was a part of a consciously-sponsored program of spirituality on the part of

the city fathers, who endowed similar windows in the York churches during this period.

The realism which these artists achieved had its end beyond any attempt to achieve an illusion of reality, for by breathing life back into the events associated with the life of Christ and the lives of the saints they hoped to proclaim more effectively the truths which had previously been taught. (Davidson "Civic Concern" 128)

By using scores of medieval visual sources from this period, Davidson demonstrated that the iconography of the plays leading up to the crucifixion corresponds in nearly all cases with that in contemporary art, and showed that its appearance in the cycle was a deliberate cue for emotive identification with Christ’s sufferings. This was an important article because it placed the plays in the visual context of their own period and region, and because it provided both a rationale for the insertion of the works of the York Realist and a set of criteria for appreciating his work in its context. Regarding the play’s physicality, Davidson noted only that "the result is an emphasis that has been found offensive by more recent historical periods.... whatever the modern assessment of his work, it is clear that his contribution to the York Passion was what the city fathers of York wanted." (Davidson "Civic Concern" 148-149)

Davidson discussed the Old Testament plays in 197554. Arguing that evolutionary approaches to episode selection did not adequately explain the choices of old Testament episodes contained in the cycle, he asked instead for a consideration of the phenomenology of these plays. By examining analogous representations, a clear emphasis on the human condition emerged; scenes were not included as "merely interesting images... presented for their own sake", nor "scientifically and dispassionately, but with a view to understanding their true significance." (Davidson "After the Fall" 2) The Old Testament episodes explored hope and despair as the human responses to existence. Davidson did not claim any links of causality or descent between the York plays and the examples of iconography he examined; nor did he use the York plays as exemplars of all medieval dramatic representations of the subject, or claim that their close adherence to traditional pictorial representations provided

an "organic unity" to the York cycle; his purpose was pedagogical.

Also in 1975 he addressed the Passion. Drawing upon his earlier work, he defined the realism of the York Realist as an aspect of what Erwin Panofsky had termed a "modernistic rebellion" marked by "a turning to immediate experience, to detail, to individuality as sources for an affective art." (Davidson "Realism" 271) The Realist "wants to have it both ways: he utilizes particulars, since these give life to the play [and].... he also relies heavily on traditional ways of communicating through iconography." (Davidson "Realism" 274) By examining individual details and comparing them with similar details in contemporary art (mainly painted glass in York, and often, the Book of Hours of Catharine of Cleves), he found a "Franciscan emphasis on an existential acquaintance with the realities of Christian life." (Davidson "Realism" 281) Davidson thus disagreed with Kolve's emphasis upon game:

The conscious purpose of the York plays was thus not to provide psychological release into dramatic game or entertainment.... The plays... were deliberately designed to impress feelingly upon the people the spectacle of the Christian story. (Davidson "Realism" 282-283)

The best summary of Davidson's interdisciplinary approach to art and drama appeared in 1976 in "Northern Spirituality and the Late Medieval Drama of York," which explored the evidence of civic piety in fifteenth century York. Davidson addressed the possibilities in critical approach which were opened by the movement away from evolutionary theory, advocating 'reciprocal illumination' (Davidson "Spirituality" 151) rather than causality:

The evolutionary approach to drama and art so prevalent in the early part of our century has been thoroughly exploded during the years since World War

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56Davidson noted Erwin Panofsky Early Netherlandish Painting (Cambridge, Mass., 1953) 1:35.

II. This development has been very fortunate, for it has forced upon us the recognition that any rigidly diachronic methodology must severely limit our discussion to events and details thoroughly wrenched out of their context. If the critical process does not therefore retreat into a formalist consideration of the literary elements of a play or the technical processes of a work of art, the possibility opens up of providing a criticism which is of necessity interdisciplinary because it is synchronic. The task does not exclude the historic perspective derived from close attention to the development of ideas, attitudes or images, but it insists nevertheless upon understanding the work which is being subjected to analysis in terms of its interrelations with other factors and events simultaneous in space and time. (Davidson "Spirituality" 125)

In 1977, Davidson compared the York and Towneley Harrowing of Hell plays\(^{58}\) with contemporary iconography, tracing a movement from sorrow to rejoicing which precisely replicated that of the Easter rites. The challenge of the gate was, for Davidson, anticlimactic: "The battle indeed has already taken place... all that remains in the Harrowing episode is a mock battle and a ceremonious rescue of souls." (Davidson "Tristia" 263) Davidson also tentatively suggested that the plays originated in processions of motionless displays:

> When the representation of the scene took shape as drama (it has been suggested that the plays developed out of *tableau vivants* originally shown as part of the Corpus Christi procession) [M. Stevens 1972 article is noted] - the playwright as well as the director of the play and actors must have remembered the mood of the Holy Saturday service which commemorates the event in the liturgy. (Davidson "Tristia" 264)

Using the internal evidence provided by the plays as well as a combination of information from records and iconography, Davidson provided a small section on the staging of the play, in which he suggested that the production must have included a smoking hell-mouth and a wall to be defended by demons, behind which the souls to be released waited.

Davidson's research in iconography\(^ {59}\) was published as a study guide in 1978, the

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\(^{59}\)Clifford Davidson and David E. O'Connor *York Art: A Subject List of Extant and Lost Art Including Items Relevant to Early Drama* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1978)
inaugural text in the Early Drama Art and Music (EDAM) series, which also published a newsletter. The volume was a systematic catalogue of extant art, and references to art now lost, which would have been in York from the thirteenth through the mid-sixteenth century. The *magnum opus* to which all of this labour eventually led in 1984, was *From Creation to Doom: The York Cycle of Mystery Plays*60. The book was an episode-by-episode examination of the local extant iconography and an imaginative reconstruction of how each would have appeared. Over half the book was a republication of previous articles, and like them it was based upon the theory that the cycle developed from *tableaux vivants*. At various points he asserted: "the play, in other words, was a speaking picture." (Davidson *Creation* 12) "Each of these plays illustrates one or two images only, and provides speeches clearly designed to vivify the tableau set forth on the pageant wagon." (Davidson *Creation* 34) [They] "are indeed designed in the manner of devotional images in the visual arts, to which were added action and speaking parts." (Davidson *Creation* 61) "It is the image which is at the core of the scene which is being presented here" (Davidson *Creation* 77) "Examples of local art suggest.... the tableau at the centre" (Davidson *Creation* 83) "Rooted in iconographic tableaux.... the repetition of theme does not appear to be symptomatic of unsatisfactory structure or design in the plays." (Davidson *Creation* 154) Although he refrained from indulging in evolutionary history, his understanding of the plays assumed a developmental process in which words, actions and music were added to existing pictures in order to make their religious content more emotionally touching, just as the plastic arts also bear witness to the rise of affective piety in their development of perspective. Often his reading of individual plays suggested that the play crystallized around a well-known iconographic figure, and that the text was simply the means of getting the characters into the positions demanded by the picture. On the sticky subject of the direction of influence, he argued strongly for a shared culture: "it is as dangerous to underrate the strength of visual tradition as to make assumptions concerning the alleged influence of drama on art.... drama and art should both be approached systematically and with the greatest scholarly tact in terms

60Clifford Davidson, *From Creation to Doom: The York Cycle of Mystery Plays* (NY: AMS Press, Inc., 1984)
of the 'entire cultural context' and of its religious basis." (Davidson Creation 194, n.1)61 The text concluded with an explanation of the attraction of his studies:

It may be refreshing for us today as scholars to reach back beyond the period dominated by the humanist and Protestant overvaluing of the word, and to make contact with a more visually oriented culture. This may seem particularly true in these times of instability and historical doom-saying.... the age of the cycle plays was also an age of pestilence, war, and even at times, near-anarchy.... they were deliberately looking beyond the immediate toward the existential realities which they saw as distinct from what could be perceived through immediate sense perception. (Davidson Creation 191-192)

Although Davidson's hypothesis of origins was never explored and remains undocumentable, his work was careful and the volume provided a much better overall study of the cycle than Collier's (see below) because the wealth of visual detail he documented proved especially useful for 'period' productions of the plays, including suggestions for costuming, blocking, props, and stage sets. His reviewers took him to task for the tendency to read local iconography as a certain indicator of the visual picture onstage; Lawrence Clopper62 pointed out an instance in which Davidson posited feathered angels, when all of the extant records indicated angels wearing albs or surplices, saying:

To assert that 'most certainly' the angels wore feathers against the texts and the extant guild documents is to use speculation as if it were proof.... The overall effect of the discussion is to suggest that we are being given a historical reconstruction when what we have is a list of possibilities drawn from iconographical traditions that might prove useful for modern productions of medieval plays. (Clopper, review of Creation 966)

Clopper also pointed out some weaknesses in Davidson's descriptions of the 'unique' qualities of the work of the York Realist. Alexandra Johnston63 criticized the study's underestimation

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62Lawrence Clopper, rev. of From Creation to Doom by Clifford Davidson Speculum 60 (October 1985) 964-967.

of the text's verbal sophistication, and its lack of "any theatrical sense of the realities of performance and particularly performance in procession" (Johnston, review of Creation 306), calling it 'seriously flawed'.

In 1978, Paula Lozar64 published an interesting study of the conception of time in the cycles which was primarily a comparison of the passion sequences of the York and N-Town plays. She proposed that there are two modes of perceiving time, the realistic and the aesthetic, which stand at opposite ends of the spectrum. Aesthetic time derives meaning from events by processing them based on pre-coding; this mode is peculiar to artistic or literary materials... the opposite mode derives meaning from the chaotic flux of experience by forming hypothetical coding systems in the act of experiencing an event and/or by coding it after it has occurred. (Lozar "Time" 387)

Drama is peculiarly capable of presenting time in either or both modes; critical discussion had addressed philosophical and religious theories of history, or performance time, but few critics, however, attempt to unite the two aspects of time, to elucidate the relationship between performance time experienced by the audience and the meaning of time they were to have gleaned from the whole cycle. (Lozar "Time" 385)

Lozar argued that the York passion plays worked consistently within the aesthetic mode, by providing each event with an amount of time proportional to its importance, rather than a realistic chronology. Because the events of the passion were separated into discrete units, each within its own 'present', the audience "perceived atemporally, as God perceived all human time in his eternal present... outside the time scheme of the events presented." (Lozar "Time" 390) By contrast, the N-Town Passion presented its events simultaneously; it was "less detailed and thoughtful" (Lozar "Time" 393), requiring its audience to comprehend in the same manner that they would perceive everyday events.

1978 also saw the publication of a full-book textual study of the York cycle by

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64Paula Lozar, "Time in the Corpus Christi Cycles: 'Aesthetic' and 'Realistic' Modes" Papers on Language and Literature 14:4 (Fall 1978) 385-393.
Richard Collier. Collier approached the cycle as poetry, not merely for the sake of the study of metrics, but in order to determine how the text functioned. He divided the cycle into three textual modes, the homiletic, the lyric and the narrative, calling for an adjustment of attitude toward its many rhetorical interjections on the basis of the purpose of the cycle: "Its aims are frankly pragmatic rather than aesthetic.... persuading the audience is a more urgent goal than entertaining it." (R. Collier 17) Thus viewed, the plays at York were a stunning artistic triumph:

Internal motifs and patterns that give coherence to the action are consistently the intensification of concerns derived from the drama's address of the audience. (R. Collier 259)

The cycle both provided an image of human existence and became the fulfilment of its own image, by leading its audience to God. The poetry of the cycle was both consistent and appropriate to each situation it depicted - "the rhetorical aims are accomplished without compromising the fictive life of the drama" (R. Collier 262) in a merging of the rhetorical and the dramatic. Collier's approach was purely textual; he "treated the cycle as a whole [without reference to the records of its performance or to the textual complexities of its development] to show that it can be treated as a whole." (R. Collier 12) As a result, his conclusions were circular and unreservedly enthusiastic. David Staines noted that "the recent publication of The York Records discredits some of his factual statements about York and the performance of its cycle." (Staines 790) Clifford Davidson called his approach "the not-so-new 'New Criticism' - a critical technique which is liable to get terribly out of hand when the critic drifts out of touch with the current state of knowledge of the religious, social or theatrical background" (Davidson rev. of R. Collier 274) and accused him of writing


66David Staines, rev. of Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus Christi Play by Richard J. Collier Speculum 54 (October 1979) 789-709.

67Clifford Davidson, rev. of Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus Christi Play by Richard J. Collier Comparative Drama 12:3 (Fall 1978) 273-277.
'advertising copy'.

In 1979, Alan Justice\(^6\) produced a study of the visual and symbolic connections between the trade guilds and the subjects of the pageants they produced. The idea that there were connections of some sort\(^6\) had first been commented upon by Chambers and more recently by Kolve, but Justice's article pushed the analogy further than either by seeking opportunities for each guild to display its wares or skills onstage and hypothesizing the staging of these opportunities. For example, the Chandlers produced Play XV, the Angels and Shepherds; Justice suggested

Because the Chandlers of medieval York produced a large variety of candles, including candles made in images, the light that shines on the shepherds in this play was probably a large piece of wax imagery made by the Chandlers in the shape of an angel. (Justice 50)

Justice also noted symbolic connections with patron saints and between the activity of the guild and that onstage. In the case of Play XLVII, the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin,

The Innkeepers performed the welcome of Mary into heaven, a subject and treatment flattering to their craft. In the traditional treatment of the Nativity, Mary and Joseph were not allowed into an inn. Perhaps this choice of subjects was intended as a partial rehabilitation of the Innkeepers from that stigma. (Justice 57)

Justice found connections in twenty-three episodes. He cautioned that the connections in York do not necessarily indicate similar connections in the Corpus Christi plays of other towns and concluded with a call for a more comprehensive understanding of the civic context of the composition and performance of the Corpus Christi plays.

The episodes of the Transfiguration and Harrowing were examined again by Edmund

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Reiss\(^{70}\) in 1979, who pointed out that the York cycle was unique in its meaningful connection of the two episodes through the figure of Moses, who developed the light imagery surrounding Christ in each episode.

A.K. Reed examined the York Abraham and Isaac episode in 1980\(^{71}\), finding that the episode had been consistently underappreciated by previous critics on the basis of its lack of the obvious pathos of a small child sacrifice. Reed argued that the play exhibited emotionalism in the form of a passion for obedience (one largely unfamiliar to a modern audience). The episode functioned around character development: "both father and son find the suffering of sacrifice a way to maturity". (Reed 39) It also had the formal shape of a comedy and foreshadowed the Passion; "the excitement inherent for the medieval audience in 'goodness'" thus provided it with "great dramatic power, as well as dignity and intellect." (Reed 43)

Richard Beadle\(^{72}\), who was currently at work on a new edition of the York cycle, issued a study of the textual background of the Abraham and Isaac episode in 1980. Beadle pointed out that the 1923 Herbert Kalen edition of the *Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament* had named the York cycle as one of its sources, mainly on the basis of Kalen's dating of the York Register in 1340-1350. Beadle argued for a reversal of this process of transmission, because the register of the York plays "is now believed to have been copied in the third quarter of the fifteenth century" (Beadle "Abraham" 187), and because the origins of the cycle itself were unclear in terms of text and date:

> a list of the pageants made by the town clerk in 1415 shows clearly that some of the plays had changed substantially in content by the time the register came to be compiled. The process of piecemeal revision was evidently continuous and can be traced into the sixteenth century. The state of a given


play in the later fifteenth century register is no guarantee that it took the same form fifty or a hundred years earlier. The date of the origin of the cycle between 1318 and 1376 is quite open to conjecture and nothing is likely to be known for certain of the state of the text or the content of the plays at this time. (Beadle "Abraham" 180)

He went on to demonstrate that the author of the Paraphrase was in turn taking material from a thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman metrical paraphrase of the Old Testament which was reproduced in a more scrambled form in the York play, and argued as well that borrowings are more typically from written text to oral play than the reverse. The article was important because its main argument destabilized the text of the York plays as a reliable historical marker: because the existing text was the result of layers of continuous revision, some fairly drastic, it could not be taken as a reliable guide to the state of the plays for a particular year, especially for the years before the MS was written. The evidence for this argument was available in Lucy Toulmin Smith's text of the plays and within the civic documents of the York REED volumes (released 1979, discussed in Chapter Five), but for the first time, the use of the text itself was carefully and indisputably brought into question.

Richard Beadle and Peter Meredith73 produced an article in 1980 which narrowed the dates of composition of the York Register. Responding to Margaret Rogerson, who dated the MS "after 1485, and perhaps near the beginning of the sixteenth century" (Beadle and Meredith "Further Evidence" 51), they placed the date "between 1463 and 1477 for the main compilation" (Beadle and Meredith "Further Evidence" 55) by examining the dates of the Fergus play, the blank spaces left in the Register, the insertion of the Purification play and the records of the Ostlers' play of the Coronation of the Virgin.

Peter Meredith went on in 1982 to examine the manuscript evidence regarding John Clerke74 and his relationship with the Register of the plays. Meredith presented the available information on Clerke's identity and relations with the Mercers' and Bakers' guilds, and then


his annotations and additions to the Register; his most significant conclusion was that Clerke was not a force of Protestant censorship, but of civic control. The evidence which Lucy Toulmin Smith had cited for the former opinion was the line regarding the Annunciation play "Doctor this matter is newly mayde, wherof we haue no coppy" (f.32). Meredith explained that the 'Doctor' referred to is not Dean Matthew Hutton, but rather the "name of the first speaker in the Annunciation pageant, accidentally omitted by the original scribe and supplied by Clerke." (Meredith "John Clerke" 249) Clerke's work was rather, "part of a continuing process of city control and not the result of a sudden ecclesiastical interest. His own work on the play either began before the Reformation was underway, or when Catholicism was again the state religion - neither of them times likely to produce Protestant censorship." (Meredith "John Clerke" 265)

In 1982 Beadle announced the discovery of an important and previously unknown lacuna in the York text:

When, in 1885, Lucy Toulmin Smith published her edition of the cycle, she offered a collation which, whilst sound in most essentials, failed to note that a single interpolated leaf (since lost) once stood in the section of the codex where the Chandlers' pageant is copied. (Beadle "Lacuna" 229)

The lacuna was indicated by a "slim strip of vellum", which could "only have been intended to key a single leaf into place in the latter half of the quire" (Beadle "Lacuna" 229); the text between lines 55 and 56 therefore lacked up to 60 lines, which must have involved "the appearance of an angel to sing 'Gloria in excelsis deo' etc., perhaps also to give a spoken message to the shepherds, and certainly part of the shepherds' immediate response." (Beadle "Lacuna" 232) Beadle supplied a corrected collation for the Register, and an edition which accounted for the lost text of the lines immediately surrounding the area.

Beadle published again in 1983, this time on the short and little-examined

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Shipwrights' play 76. His article provided a number of details on the art of fifteenth-century shipbuilding, which corresponded to the terminology of the text, the most interesting features of which were its correspondence in both technical and metaphorical terms with various levels of the audience's understanding. "This ability to appeal to different levels of assent in an audience is often a mark of skill in dramatic poetry, and the evidence for the York dramatist's ability in this direction may be readily elaborated." (Beadle "Shipwrights" 60)

The play emphasized skill in craft, giving a divinely sponsored education and demonstration to its audience in the art of its guild, and through the use of puns and word-play, the text emphasized this connection.

In 1981, Richard Homan 77 applied the anthropological ideas of Victor Turner 78 to the text and records of the York Cycle in order to define its organization and performance as having ritual rather than [merely] aesthetic purpose. He argued that the presence of anachronism within the plays "can be seen as an effort to communicate actively with the scheme of redemption... in the context of the medieval concept of history as a pattern of figural relationships." (Homan 307) Additionally, the pattern of guild assignments to their episodes which Alan Justice had explored "served to make present the efficacious figure in God's plan for salvation and thus had an actual power for the medieval Christian." (Homan 307)

Applying Turner's hypothesis that "the object was to discover whether the performance was efficacious in resolving some anomaly in the social structure" (Homan 310), Homan found that the power structure in medieval York revolved around the contradiction that "the


78 Turner's work and its effect in fields beyond anthropology is discussed by Kathleen Ashley in the introduction to Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism ed. Kathleen Ashley (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990); the same volume also contains C. Clifford Flanigan's essay "Liminality, Carnival and Social Structure: the Case of Late Medieval Biblical Drama", which discusses the applicability of Turner's and Bakhtin's ideas to the study of medieval drama.
distribution of political power among the guilds and groups of guilds was balanced to suggest representation of all but in fact to concentrate power in the hands of the Mercers" (311), and thus that the festival existed so that

a microcosm of the political and economic structure of the town in economic inequalities, unresolvable in fact, could be resolved, and most importantly, in which the central anomaly of the city government could be ritualistically put right. (Homan 313)

The Corpus Christi play was thus centred in the craft guild system, its function or implicit purpose being "to preserve the balance of structure and communitas in that social structure". It was, in this respect, unlike the Creed and Pater Noster plays.

This cultural anthropology-based approach was taken up in 1983 by Mervyn James, who examined the ritual significations of the Corpus Christi cult, focusing largely on York. He argued that the 'body' was one of the ways in which society defined itself, and that "the language of body provided an instrument by means of which social wholeness and social differentiation could be conceived and experienced at many different levels." (James 8) The function of the Corpus Christi play cycles, like that of York, was thus "to make Corpus Christi an occasion on which the urban community could effectively present and define itself in relation to the outside world" (James 12), and to enhance the city's "urban honour in the world at large." (James 13) Within the urban milieu, the play cycles also provided a mechanism... by which tensions implicit in the diachronic rise and fall of occupational communities could be confronted and worked out (15); a mechanism by means of which status, and the honour which went with status, could be distributed and redistributed with a minimum of conflict resulting. (James 18)

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79 See also Charles Phythian-Adams, "Ceremony and the Citizen: the communal year at Coventry 1450-1550" in Peter Clark and Paul Slack eds. Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) 57-85. Phythian-Adams argued that the year divided into ritual and secular halves, the secular half gradually eliminating the ritual half. He also argued that the plays in Coventry were a reminder of social boundaries, clearly delineating guild members from non-members and the hierarchical relationships within and between the guilds.

80 Mervyn James, "Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town" Past & Present 98 (1983) 3-29.
He argued that the abandonment of the plays arose partially from "the rise of the new humanistic dramatic style finding expression in the interlude and the Biblical stage play" and partially from a movement toward 'urban authoritarianism' which marked the sixteenth century, causing the tensions which had always been present in the plays to appear 'potentially disruptive' (James 27). These disruptions were an aspect of the plays' 'ludic quality', which turned "truths of religion... into stage illusions... reality to a game", resulting in the "tendency to loosen social constraints and inner controls." (James 28) This article made no reference to the REED records, accusing such scholars as Nelson, Dorrell and Taylor of "lacking... anything more than a very generalized idea of the late medieval social background against which the cult was practiced and the plays performed." (James 3-4)

1982 saw the release of the first new edition\(^2\) of the York plays since Lucy Toulmin Smith's in 1885. Richard Beadle was the editor, and while he credited her work on the editio princeps, his own was different from hers in a number of ways: pages were renumbered to account for blanks and unnoticed lacunae, stage directions not original to the text were removed, lines were restructured, notes on the history of each play-text were included at the back, some plays were retitled to more accurately reflect their content (although Beadle's titles also differed from those used in the REED: York volume), and the plays of the Masons and Goldsmiths were combined into one entity of several scenes which alternated between the guilds. Most of all, it differed from the first edition in that the sense of the text as the product of one mind at one specific point in history was completely replaced with a sense of

\(^1\)James was later cited by Teresa Coletti ("Reading REED: History and the Records of Early English Drama" in Lee Patterson (ed.) Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain 1380-1530 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990) 248-284) as an example of "significant interpretive work... achieved without REED's assistance." (272) See chapter 5 for further discussion of Coletti's article. The social conditions in York (but not the plays) were discussed by D.M. Palliser, "Civic Mentality and the Environment in Tudor York" Northern History 18 (1982) 78-115.

continuous revision. One reviewer commented on the text's "lack of commentary.... that expands various ideas, particularly obscure theological doctrines" (Pigg 175) and its silent editorial handling of variant spellings. Clifford Davidson noted a lost line: "l.266 is missing from Play XLVII at the bottom of p. 412" (Davidson rev. of Beadle York 18). Both reviewers looked forward to the publication of the facsimile of the original text, which also included a facsimile of the Ordo Paginaram section of the A/Y Memorandum Book and a note on the music of the plays by Richard Rastall. In 1984 Richard Beadle and Pamela King also edited a textbook version of 22 of the plays in modern spelling (not a modernization; only a smoothing out of archaic spellings) for classroom or performance use. The introduction of this volume provided a good basic summary of up-to-date information on the York plays.

With these publications, especially that of the facsimile, the text of the play became more accessible and somehow less easily definable. Peter Meredith, who co-edited the facsimile, said "It is now unfashionable to believe that one can establish an authoritative text of a medieval work of literature." (Meredith "Scribes" 13) The effect of the research into the records and text of the play was to emphasize its changing quality. Meredith concluded about the Register:

The manuscript of the York play is then a late-fifteenth century official civic document, compiled for the purpose of control over the activities of the crafts

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in their Corpus Christi pageants. Written apparently by local scribes, it was annotated in their official capacities by the Common Clerks or their deputies, often during the performance of the play at the first station, or corrected by them from the craft copies. It is last heard of in the City's hands when it was to be sent for correction to the Archbishop and Dean of York in 1579 for a projected performance that never took place. (Meredith "Scribes" 16)

This approach to the text included all of the marginalia and interpolations; it did not seek to purify the text in order to locate an 'original text', or an the intent of an individual genius; rather, it attempted to present the text in all of its variants, to allow for many possibilities.

This chapter has sketched out the major movement in twentieth-century York cycle scholarship: from textual evolution to cultural artifact; chapters four and five examine smaller historical periods at increasingly close perspectives.
Chapter Four
Performing the York Cycle

At this point this study departs from strictly chronological order to examine the tradition of medieval theatre in performance which developed in the first half of this century, the performances of the York plays for the York Festival which began in 1951, and a few of the most significant whole-cycle performances thereafter. These performances have profoundly affected scholarship about the plays. This chapter does not cover the many productions of individual episodes of the York plays because the topic would be unmanageably huge and because, while the small performances have been demonstrated to be a very useful research tool, they generally leave an impression far less durable and widespread than the after-effects of a production of the whole cycle. This chapter also examines scholarship which was based on the imaginative reconstruction of performance, and the ways in which scholarship about the York plays has been changed by the experience of performance in order to demonstrate that although performances, like movements in academic fashion, are very much a part of their time, they have permanently changed the ways in which the plays are perceived. The experience of seeing the plays rather than reading them has raised interest in their original staging, effects on their audiences, and relations to iconography, and it has shifted academic focus from their literary qualities to their dramatic qualities.

Performances of the York plays did not get started without a struggle with the after-effects of the Reformation. In England a struggle with the Lord Chamberlain’s office had been going on since the turn of the century for the right to portray God onstage. 1 Biblical subjects were banned altogether until 1912. Biblical tableaux were performed in churches in the 1880’s and 1890’s, and “the first modern performance of a play with speaking parts

1 see John R. Elliott jr. Playing God: Medieval Mysteries on the Modern Stage (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989) Much of what follows is a recapitulation of this fine study.

Yates 140
took place in a church in 1889” (Elliott 54). The character of Christ first appeared in a church play in 1921, a passion modelled on Oberammergau; he appeared only in the ministry scenes and was crucified offstage. In 1932, E. Martin Browne wrote that neither God nor Jesus could appear on stage or take a speaking part; offstage voices and performances in churches were not covered by this rule, but church performances had to be approved by the Diocesan Bishop: "It is at present axiomatic in England that the person of Christ shall not be shown, even in church." (Elliott 63)

It was not only the medieval plays which were involved; after the widely-toured production of *Everyman*, contemporary playwrights such as T.S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers and John Masefield became interested in the possibilities of ritual and spiritual experience which religious drama offered. Dorothy Sayers\(^2\) wrote *The Man Born to be King*, a ‘cycle’ of twelve episodes which covered the birth, ministry, passion and resurrection of Christ, for radio broadcast on the BBC in 1942. Despite the fact that no stage or live audience was ever involved, the production raised some furious opposition. This came mainly in response to the modernization of the Biblical material; Sayers made her own translations from the Greek, reorganized Gospel chronology, introduced fictional characters where necessary for dramatic coherence and wrote the speeches in recognizably twentieth-century dialect. The cumulative effect was to strip away the protective air of exotic alterity provided by the King James version, making the events of Christ’s life brutal and immediate. Sayers said:

Sacred personages, living in a far-off land and time, using dignified rhythms of speech, making from time to time restrained gestures symbolic of brutality... No doubt it was all done in the noblest and most beautiful manner... Unhappily, if we think about it at all, we must think otherwise. God was executed by people painfully like us... In a nation famous for its religious genius and under a government renowned for its efficiency, He was executed by a corrupt church, a timid politician and a fickle proletariat led by professional agitators. His executioners made vulgar jokes about Him, called Him filthy names, taunted Him, smacked Him in the face, flogged Him with the cat and hanged Him on the common gibbet - a bloody, dusty, sweaty and sordid business. (Sayers 22-23)

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\(^2\)Dorothy Sayers, *The Man Born to be King* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943)
In spite of the initial opposition, Sayers' work convinced a large number of members of the British cultural and religious establishment that religious performance, rather than destroying Christianity, might be conducive to increased spirituality.

Productions of the mystery plays were certainly happening in England in the first half of the twentieth century: John Elliott lists twenty of them in England in the period 1901-1938. The majority of these productions were Nativities and old Testament episodes; the Passion could not be represented. What were these early shows like and what were their production values?

The medieval plays (sometimes episodes from York) were taken up during the nineteen-twenties by religious writers who saw in them the outlines of a teaching tool; these were the first to conceive that the plays might still be performable. They replaced the harsh critiques of the early Protestant philologists and antiquarians with sentimental evocations of spiritual feeling. These writers approached the plays in an affective manner, and their favourites were therefore those which generated the most humane emotional responses - Abraham's Sacrifice, and especially the Nativity sequence. While this response was linked ideologically with the emphasis on 'feeling' of the Romantic movement and with Ruskin's ideas about the middle ages, it materialized around the York plays in the first decades of the twentieth century, and eventually led to E.Martin Browne's staging of the cycle in 1951.

Despite the fact that biblical/religious subjects were banned by the Lord Chamberlain's office, evidence exists of an interest in 'contraband' biblical drama. An 1891 article described an underground performance of a biblical play of "Joseph and his Brethren" which took place in the Yorkshire area. After recalling the medieval biblical plays and their suppression, the author asked

Might they not still be useful for the religious education of the masses?... If painting had this marvellous effect, how much more impressive must have

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3See Elliott 44-46 on Nugent Monck's abortive attempt in 1909 to stage the "Coventry" Passion and 67-69 on his privately staged "Norwich" Passion in 1938.

Herford described the performance and its effects on the audience, finding it "natural and unaffected", "most striking and at times almost noble, if not grand" (Herford 292); the audience "listened with profound attention" (Herford 289) and "though rudely given, it was impossible to see and hear the sorrow of the old man without emotion" (Herford 295); "Many are the testimonies to the powerful effect on the audience by these representations". Herford's own inquiry to the Lord Chamberlain's office as to whether such representations were truly forbidden received a "courteous and decided answer": Joseph and His Brethren, which was written by Louis N. Parker eventually became the first Biblical play licensed by the Lord Chamberlain, when the ban on Biblical subjects was relaxed in 1912 (Elliott 55).

Interest in biblical performances in the late nineteenth century was allied with the desire for affective spiritual experience and these performances tended to materialize in Ruskin's terms: rude simplicity and stately grandeur.

In 1893 Katharine Lee Bates published a teaching volume filled with colourful, Ruskin-like prose in which she sketched a generalized outline of the growth of the drama from liturgical tropes to guild productions. Bates' approach depreciated the text in favour of the performance. Miracle plays were "the dramatic patchwork of blundering old monks" (Bates 88),

preparing the day of the Elizabethan stage, for despite all crudities, prolixities and absurdities of detail, these English Miracle Cycles are nobly dramatic both in range and spirit. In verbal expression they are almost invariably weak and bald, but on the medieval scaffold-stage the actor counted for more than the author, and the religious faith and feeling of the audience filled in the homely lines with an unwritten poetry. (Bates 35)

Bates' narrative of the development of the English theatrical tradition focussed on the interaction of the Church with native instincts:

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But here the clergy, aided by the fact that these gay Frenchmen could not readily gain the ear of the humiliated, angry Saxon peasantry, held their own fairly well, and maintained the lead in the establishment of the national theatre. (Bates 37)

Unlike Charles Davidson, whose 'sturdy' and 'rebellious' Northern Septenario stanza demonstrated the native English growth of the cycle plays, Bates implied that their root was French, but that the English plays had a more earnest devotional quality, their devils exciting terror, where the French devils "degenerated into drolls" (Bates 43). The comic elements were forced into the plays by the peasantry:

That this food for mirth was sometimes of the coarsest should not be taken as proving intentional irreverence on the part of players or of hearers. It points to social rather than moral causes. The conditions of family life for the lower classes of the English... precluded delicacy of manners or of speech. (Bates 48)

Our English miracles sprang from a Saxon-Norman stock, in some cases, notably in that of the Coventry plays⁶, under strong French influence... the chief sources of Miracle material in England may be ranked as the Vulgate, the Apocryphal gospels, and the manners of the time, especially among the poorer classes. (Bates 170)

Bates chose the Towneley plays as her exemplar; York was "probably derived from the same original series, now lost... but at an earlier date than the Towneley." (Bates 90) The York plays were "subdued in tone after the Towneley collection... their religious sentiment is deeper, and their general treatment of the Biblical history more reverent and appropriate". Yet York jarred her sensibilities in its Passion sequence "drawing out beyond all endurance the scenes of insult and torture... distract[ing] attention from the spiritual and ideal element... belitt[ing] and confus[ing] the main conception." (Bates 95-96) Bates commented often and approvingly on the "quiet light of homely beauty" (Bates 101) of the domestic scenes, and found much that was admirable in the devotional qualities of the York plays:

⁶Bates neither denied nor confirmed that the N-Town plays were performed in Coventry. She listed the questions raised about the MS and then closed by calling it a "Valuable series of plays".
in this old York series, over which a fragrance of incense seems to linger...
the fervours and tendermesses of medieval Christianity are especially exemplified. (Bates 105)

Bates' critical approach to the cycles was ambivalent. She found grandeur in the mighty sweep of Divine history (replete with Miltonic overtones); but the texts of the individual cycles were tedious and unpoetic. Like Ward and Collier, she was a generalizer of literary history. She had listened to "the click of all these crowding German microscopes" (Bates 169) to the extent that she absorbed the idea of evolution from a parent cycle of York and Towneley, as Davidson had (from Hohlfeld), but her approach was limited by her upper-class Protestant view. The cycles had "served the Elizabethan drama well" (Bates 199) but because "none of the products of the Middle Ages had sinned more grievously against spirituality than the Miracle Plays", the "strong purifying wave" of the Reformation "swept the land clear" of "the triviality, the grossness, the falseness, of the old religious stage". (Bates 198-199) Her writing was vivid, simple and emotional; the text was widely accessible; her views continued to appear in the work of later writers for many years, and must have had a profound effect on the generation of younger scholars who first encountered the medieval drama in her book.

Since Everyman was the first taste of "authentic" and "English" medieval drama which was widely available to the theatrical and academic communities, the staging practices of this production are relevant. It was first staged in 1901 in the Master's court of the Charterhouse in London by William Poel. Poel, who was a Victorian product of the Rationalist era and a virulent anti-Catholic, came to the play shortly after the death of his mother.7

There was a positive side to Poel's faith too - a strong ethical quality and an admiration for the simplicity of Christ, which for him contrasted to the artificiality of the Church as a dogmatizing institution. (Weales 95)

The rights to the production were acquired shortly thereafter by Ben Greet, and the play went on to an astonishing twenty-year run, including tours to North America. The show was characterized by "solemnity and reverence" (Elliott 43), the look of an Old Master and the atmosphere (including the sound of Gregorian chant and the smell of liturgical incense) of a church. The audiences responded appropriately:

To the people of fashion in London and New York... the sudden realization of the meaning of Death brings a profound sensation. Rapt attention was given by the first night audience... They behaved like a congregation in Church.... The assembling audience found themselves in a dimly lighted hall and may have been convinced for a moment that they had entered a Church.... The costumes in the production were copied so closely after Holbein that the characters seemed as though they had stepped out of the Masters' canvasses.... For it was not only a drama of unusual cumulative power and a perfect specimen of Gothic Art, but actually a prayer that by the virile imagery of its rugged lines drives home its lesson to every man. (Isaac 77-80)\(^6\)

Ben Greet explained a little of the highly-wrought symbolic design of the play in its 1903 programme notes\(^9\):

The scenery... is copied from an old print of a monastery- especially the cloistered part- such plays as this being presented in churches, in parts of religious houses, at times even in the streets. The costumes are copied from Flemish tapestries. The little music introduced is that of the long ago by Adam de la Halle and Jacques Arkadelt. One tiny verse attributed to Shakespeare is sung. The "ascensions" of the stage are symbolical: the flowers denote cultivation of the soil; the little organ, art; the wheels, work; the cushions, rest after labour; and the candles, worship and thanks due. For all such a double stage was generally used to denote any change of locality required. The characters, entering when possible from the audience - speak often in monotone, especially those representing abstractions, that being the primitive style of delivery. (Greet 4)

The production was a highly manipulative call to the spiritual conditioning of its modern

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\(^{9}\)Philip Ben Greet Everyman: Being a Moralle Playe of the XV Centurie (Boston: L. Sackes, 1903)
audience, distinctly removed from the secular world, and comfortingly familiar in its theology. These production values: carefully wrought visual symbolism, recognizable but chronologically unrelated works of great art, the atmosphere of the (English) church, and the evangelical call to the soul in chanted lines, remained fixed in most stagings of medieval plays for decades. The effective productions, like this Everyman, were effective because they provided their audiences with a spiritual experience and the illusionistic sense of entering the past. The less successful productions were hampered by the heavy pious conventionality which T.S. Eliot later criticized, and failed to sustain the illusion of historicity by relying too heavily on 'timeless' quality of their Biblical content.

In 1904, Charles Gayley\(^{10}\) became the first scholar to base a critical judgement of medieval drama upon a performance he had witnessed; the show was (quite naturally) the Wakefield Second Shepherd's Play:

> Those who have witnessed in recent times the reproduction of the *Secunda Pastorum* at one of the American universities bear testimony to the propriety and charm, as well as the dramatic effect with which the foreground of the sheep-stealing fades into the radiant picture of the nativity. The pastoral atmosphere is already shot with a prophetic gleam, the fulfilment is, therefore, no shock or contrast, but a transfiguration - an epiphany. (Gayley *Comedies* intro.)

The effect of the experience was apparently enough to propel Gayley into productions of his own; he became involved with the American tour version of Ben Greet's *Everyman* and added a second show which was a conglomeration of the medieval nativity plays to the Berkeley performance:

> In my *Star of Bethlehem*, as played by Mr. Ben Greet's company, an attempt has been made to revive this and other Nativity plays, and adapt them to modern requirements. (Gayley *Comedies* intro.)

As an Oxford-trained scholar in the sunny freedom of Berkeley, he was unconstrained by the British custom preventing performance of biblical subjects; perhaps the experience of staging the *Secunda Pastorum* contributed to his interest in the realistic qualities of the York plays.

\(^{10}\)Charles M. Gayley, *Representative English Comedies* (NY: Duffield & Co., 1904)
A Ph.D. thesis\textsuperscript{11} published in 1911 by Matthew Lyle Spencer, one of John Manly's students, approached the medieval plays for the first time on the basis of what they would have looked like in performance. Spencer presented no new information; his work was based entirely on the English records published to that date\textsuperscript{12}. While he touched on the idea of the plays' evolution from liturgical sources, he did so fleetingly, focussing instead on the existing plays and records in order to describe the procession of Corpus Christi, the preparations for the plays, their staging, the pageant wagons, actors, properties and costumes. Spencer's main contribution was a thorough discussion of staging in which he argued that processional plays were staged \textit{entirely} on the pageant wagons, without the use of stationary scaffolds or the street:

that the pageant-wagon was the stage, that the separate sedes were placed on this stage and that none of our extant processional plays demand a larger stage than may be met with on the pageant-wagon. (Spencer 118-119)

In order to argue this idea, he attacked Albright's theory\textsuperscript{13} that scaffolds were built in some places in the streets, which relied on the Rogers' Breviary; in so doing, he questioned the reliability of the Breviary account for the first time. He placed not only all of the sedes on the wagons, but also the platea, which he argued, as on a Elizabethan stage, was indicated by the presence of a few trees (Spencer 170). This visualization, which may be summarized as pageant wagon = stage, was problematic in that he seemed to propose wagons of unlimited

\textsuperscript{11}Spencer, Matthew Lyle \textit{Corpus Christi Pageants in England} (NY: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1911) This dissertation was from the Department of English at the University of Chicago.

\textsuperscript{12}Davies \textit{Extracts from the Municipal Records of the City of York} (1843); Morris \textit{Chester During the Plantagenet and Tudor Reigns} (n.d.); Furnivall - "for his reprint of the Rogers' Breviary of Chester and for many other valuable helps"; Miss L.T. Smith's introduction to the \textit{York Mystery Plays} (1885); A.F. Leach \textit{Beverley Town Documents} (1900); E.K. Chambers \textit{Medieval Stage} (1903); Bates \textit{English Religious Drama} (1893); Craig \textit{Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays}, who "makes the work of Sharp... more accessible."

\textsuperscript{13}V.E. Albright, \textit{The Shakespearian Stage} (NY, 1909) 25-27.
size\textsuperscript{14}, and in that his rather severe judgements\textsuperscript{15} about the plays were based on comparisons with the modern stage, complete with curtains (Spencer 202), fully illusionary sets (Spencer 168), and the attempt at historical authenticity (Spencer 247) and continuities of time (Spencer 187) and place (Spencer 184-185). He had little to say specifically about York; indeed, his approach to the records was like that of Chambers in the indiscriminate use of whatever seemed to argue his point, without regard for historical time or place. Spencer's work provided a new approach: the visualization of the plays as things which were performed, rather than as texts. His stage-based interest testified to the immense influence which studies of the Shakespearian stage exercised upon those of the medieval drama at this point.

In 1911 a textbook appeared\textsuperscript{16} which was designed for children, perhaps in Sunday School, which presented many 'facts' about the medieval plays in a simplified narrative form, using a more intense version of the sentimental tone of flowery description that Katherine Lee Bates had used. The book did not describe the Passion plays, stopping at the Slaughter of the Innocents and going on instead to describe Everyman in the final chapter. Although elementary and often ludicrously inaccurate, the virtue of this book was that it encouraged the reader to imagine what a performance of the plays might have looked and felt like - it

\textsuperscript{14}Of the actual size of the Corpus Christi pageant cars, and hence of the stage, very little is known. Dugdale describes the wagons as large and high, and the fact that they were sometimes placed on six wheels would indicate pageants of considerable size... At Coventry in 1435 there is a record that "a parcel of land in Mill Lane... being 30 1/2 feet wide and 70 1/2 long was granted and let... [for] 'a Piaont hows'. From this entry some vague idea of the size of one of these wagons might be gained, were it not for the fact that... more than one wagon was often stored in the same house. On such a plot of ground, at any rate, a pageant-house might be built big enough to contain a very large wagon." (Spencer 95)

\textsuperscript{15}In the chapter "Conventions of the Corpus Christi Stage" he used the term 'crude/crudity' 14 times within 21 pages; in the same space he also used 'incongruous/incongruity' 8 times, and 'absurd' twice with reference to Corpus Christi play staging.

\textsuperscript{16}Netta Syrett, The Old Miracle Plays of England (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co. / Milwaukee: The Young Churchman Company, 1911)
was an affective, rather than a scholastic treatment of the subject, and it suggested that the author spoke from the experience of a modern performance, probably of a church Nativity play. It also demonstrated that knowledge about the medieval plays was not the exclusive domain of university-level researchers and antiquarians: the much-discussed historical 'facts' had by now been absorbed into a more general level of culture, and in this form could have been a part of the educational process of the next generation of scholars.

In 1928 another anthology of medieval plays appeared, this one very clearly oriented toward church performance. It included the York Nativity sequence with the addition of the Towneley prologue and provided three photographs of the stations on which they were performed in St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Minneapolis. Osgood tried hard to make York (back) into a liturgical play: oddly, he chose it over the other cycles because they seem to have been handed down for their three centuries relatively uncontaminated. They most nearly perpetuate what must have been the text and the ideal when Mystery Plays were still acted in the chancels of cathedrals and other minsters - i.e. before the degeneration and theatre developments of humour and rant had their opportunity with pageant-wagon fair-days. (Osgood 133-134)

His text was modernized from "the ancient Norman-Latin-Saxon text" of "Miss Lucy Toulmin Smith's edition of the original." (Osgood 133) Symbolism was the prime dramatic value in the performance, which was characterized by "naive simplicity" and quaintness (Osgood 127). In this instance, medieval drama was not performed for either theatrical or research purposes; it was performed for religious reasons and it was therefore subject to the inherited Puritan tastes, vision and judgements of an audience and director who wanted their Biblical plays cleansed of the taint of the theatre.

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17Phillips Endecott Osgood, Old-Time Church Drama Adapted: Mystery Plays and Moralities of Earlier Days for Sundry Churchly Uses Today (NY and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1928) This volume was purchased for the University of Toronto Library with a Canada Council Special Grant for the History of Theatre and Drama; scholarly and religious uses were not unmixed in this case.
George Coffman's "Plea for the Study of the Corpus Christi Plays as Drama" took a tentative first step toward an academic link between textual research and performance in 1929. After a detailed bibliographical survey of the field, which was then entangled in Marie Lyle's controversial parent-cycle theory, Coffman outlined a proposal for a different approach:

we should recognize a certain fact: They were intended to be presented. They were presented. They were popular.... the pertinent questions are: How much did drama as such contribute to their continued popularity? And how notable a contribution are they to dramatic literature? (Coffman "Plea" 417)

He proposed the York cycle as the subject for this study, noting the source studies to date and the fact that "no one has studied the sources singly or in combination from the point of view of the dramatic effectiveness of the material selected." (Coffman "Plea" 420) Such a study, he added, "might add significant contributions to those who have tried to distinguish by stylistic differences between the genuine dramatist and the patch-worker." (Coffman "Plea" 421) The work of Pollard, Gayley and Manly, in trying to determine how the plays were related to the Elizabethan drama through the presence of humour, "led to an obscuring of the real issue" (Coffman "Plea" 422), that

such aspects should be interpreted only in their relation to the general scheme... in relation to the realistic technique which would make the scene more authentic. Thus the dramatist might be fully as much concerned with driving a point home as with raising a laugh. (Coffman "Plea" 423)

Coffman reached toward an understanding of affective piety when he stated that "the essence of drama is the appeal to the emotions" (Coffman "Plea" 424), and called for a study of the York plays which explored this appeal based on "the complete acceptance of the theme dramatized as a historical reality and as vital to the life and destiny of the spectator." (Coffman "Plea" 423) This approach challenged the old Puritan prejudice against the literal effectiveness of the sign by suggesting that realism ultimately has cosmic as well as comic dimensions. Coffman lamented the fact that "it is impossible to see a performance of any

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cycle today," hoping that "sometime in the future an English town or city imbued with a spirit akin to that of the Madrigal Singers or other folk societies, may give us a revival of one of the preserved cycles." (Coffman "Plea" 417)

Coffman raised the interesting critical question of how and why the cycles were being studied. The first response in this new meta-critical discourse came from Robert Withington. Withington countered that "their growth is of importance because of what developed from them" (Withington 579) and that "to note how the comedy in the Devil leads to that in the Vice, and that in turn to such figures as the Gravedigger, and Bottom, and Dogberry... is the 'real issue'." (Withington 580) There is, he said, "the danger of judging these plays in the light of subsequent dramatic achievement" (Withington 573); "we" do not respond to the plays the way "they" do: "what we find dull, they did not always find dull; they found effective much that we find ineffective." (Withington 576) Rather, we should remember "that dramatic effectiveness of the material selected was secondary to moral instruction." (Withington 578) Despite these cautions, Withington believed "most of us who teach in this field are keenly aware of the dramatic values of these plays," and like Coffman, called for their performance. He was the first to mention the incorporation of performances by students as a teaching technique; "without, it must be confessed, a serious attempt to produce the plays as they were first given", which he considered "a difficult task, and perhaps inadvisable" (Withington 581 n.17) At Smith College the attempt was made to stage a Secunda Pastorum, a Noah play, the Brome Abraham and Isaac, or an Everyman every year. The Noah play was a composite of all six extant episodes, with results "more amusing than instructive" but the other plays "showed the dramatic possibilities". Ben Greet's new production of Everyman in November 1929, "surprised most of the undergraduates." Withington's attitude to the plays was ambivalent - he thought "I am not sure that even the professors could stand the whole of a cycle - a performance which is based entirely on an historical interest is not likely to be effective." (Withington 582) The cycle plays were clearly

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"dramatic," and yet not quite as accessible to the modern scholar as the Renaissance plays; they were worthy of study on their own merits, yet the "real" stimulus of such study was still their relationship to Shakespeare; they should be seen, yet performance could not effectively breach the gap between modern and medieval perceptions.

In response to Coffinan's call, Effie McKinnon compressed her M.A. thesis into a 1931 article titled "Notes on the Dramatic Structure of the York Cycle". Her thesis rested on the formalist idea that "intrinsic worth" was equivalent to "dramatic structure". She argued that the York cycle should be read not as a series of individual plays, but as a "great composite unit" (MacKinnon 441); "Structural unity is to be discovered in the whole performance and not in the purely arbitrary and changing divisions." (MacKinnon 438) This structural unity was present in the Miltonic theme of "God's scheme of salvation for mankind." Signs of the conscious use of this theme were available in that "the medieval playwright took especial pains to make clear the unity of the whole and the relation of parts to each other" (MacKinnon 442). In the York cycle, the episodes were "carefully integrated... [and] closely related to each other and to the scheme of the cycle." (MacKinnon 449) This form of close reading was based heavily in the ideas circulating around Milton and Shakespeare; it lifted the plays out of their original social and historical circumstances and into the realm of pure literature.

The Corpus Christi plays tended to be valued either forward in time, for their comic potential for growth, or backward for their ancient religious expression. Critics of the first group criticized them for scholastic didacticism; those of the second, for lay corruption.

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21 see Allen H. Gilbert "Milton and the Mysteries" Studies in Philology 17 (1920) 147-169. Gilbert used examples drawn from Chester, York and Ludus Coventriae to argue that "the mysteries, in their humble way, seem to have been of service in developing Biblical material for Milton... [they] are in contact with the life of the people and have in them the same breath of humanity." (169) Gilbert did not suggest that Milton could have seen the mysteries, only that he had "some means of indirect access to them, or to other plays like them." (167)
Neither group had much interest in, or sympathy for late medieval Catholicism. The combination of Young's influence and the contemporary growth of amateur religious drama productions, mostly Nativity pageants, was apparent in the 1935 summarizing work of Alardyce Nicoll\(^2\), who was of the first party:

> From a liturgical beginning with simple chanted dialogue, this new drama developed until it assumed the vast proportions of the mystery cycle; sometimes, as in those scenes where Mrs. Noah plays the shrew with her husband, or where a thievish Mak steals one of the flock of his fellow shepherds, it embraced within its reach the merriment of the secular. (Nicoll 5)

Nicoll extended the evolutionary model from the text to the stage: just as the script 'evolved' from an origin within the liturgy, so did the playing space.

> This "place" forming the main stage and roughly corresponding to the acting ground in the cathedral nave, might be merely the street itself... Like the floor of the Church in the days of liturgical drama, it formed a general acting-ground which could be "anywhere". (Nicoll 11)

Likewise, just as the text contained "intrusions" in the form of non-liturgical comic material, so too must the performance have been marred, undignified and dramatically ineffective:

> Interpretation was not kept simple and ritualistically pure: the crackling of squibs and the creaking of ropes accompanied the enunciation of God's blessing and the last agonized cry of Jesus. (Nicoll 15) Only by amateurs could the long series of mystery plays have been produced... (Nicoll 17) The solemnity and care, of course, must often enough have been of a rather ludicrous sort. (Nicoll 19) Of sincerity and vigour in the histrionic interpretation there must have been much, but of polished rendering and of technical skill virtually nothing. (Nicoll 21) [italics mine]

Nicoll proposed a dualistic performance style which was an insoluble mixture of earthy and heavenly:

> One suspects... that two sharply marked styles appeared in the acting of these mystery plays, corresponding to the two styles in their composition. On the

\(^2\)Alardyce Nicoll *The English Theatre: A Short History* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1936)
one hand, there was the serious Biblical material, solemn in its import and closely to be allied to the liturgical ceremonials within the Church, and on the other, the intrusive matter of invented sort, rich with comic vigour and bearing a definite relationship to the farcical entertainments of wandering professional actors. (Nicoll 26)

Nicoll's dismissive reading might just as well have been a review of the amateur church productions of the plays which were most commonly available at the time. Directed toward the spiritual expectations of their pious Protestant audiences, they too were uncomfortable with the textual mixture of the comic and sacred, and seem to have tended either toward stiff and undramatic over-solemnity, or sentimental 'Olde Englande' cuteness. I believe that the ways in which the Corpus Christi plays were academically understood and the kinds of stagings available at the time were mutually interdependent. Dismissive readings produced often unchallenging stagings, and frequently dull stagings gave weight to dismissive readings; religious matter and the evolutionary connection with the liturgy produced pietistic stagings in churches, and the necessary solemnity of in-church production forced the connection with the liturgy to appear obvious and unquestionable. In 1937, T.S. Eliot described church pageants as

something to be attended, like a bazaar or a jumble sale, from a sense of duty rather than for the purpose of enjoyment. You may even feel that you have fulfilled your duty if you buy tickets and manage to give them away to somebody who will go in your place.... Levity - and perhaps seriousness as well - are unsuitable to the twentieth century. Nothing in the nature of a shock is tolerable: we are apt to forget that the original biblical events which in the Biblical narrative we treat with such familiarity, are themselves, if we regard them with fresh eyes, profoundly shocking.\(^2\)

The Religious Drama Society, which was formed in 1929, and E. Martin Browne, who was appointed Director of Religious Drama for the Diocese of Chichester (the first such position ever created in the Church of England) in 1930, provided renewed impetus for

\(^2\)T.S. Eliot *Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern* (NY: House of Books Ltd.: 1954) This original 300-copy autographed edition contains no page numbering. Eliot identified it within the text as "the text of an address which I delivered to the Friends of Rochester Cathedral in 1937."
stagings both of medieval plays and of newly written plays on religious subjects for the Canterbury Festival. Browne directed his focus toward elevating the frequently low quality of amateur religious performances in order to improve their twentieth-century evangelizing capabilities. With the exception of such scholars as Gayley and Withington, productions of medieval plays seem most often to have been the province of non- or semi-professional church groups, and were characterized by an undemanding sentimentality during the twenties. (Weales 106)

Browne was trained at Oxford for the Anglican ministry and came into contact with the eucharistic Anglo-Catholicism of the Oxford movement and the theatrical possibilities of staging Shakespeare while he was there.24 "I was deeply attracted by Catholic ritual," he says, "and simultaneously by another kind of ritual which grew out of religion, the theatre." (Browne Two in One 8) His approach to the religious plays which he directed was focussed on their theatrical effectiveness in the twentieth century; of Oberammergau, he said:

I was rebelliously determined to get away from this pietism in the work ahead of me - however inept and crude most of it would seem compared to this perfect precision, it must be free to grow into our own century, free to find its own life. (Browne Two in One 58)

Because of his position as an employee of the Diocese of Chichester, and because of the prohibition which prevented the representation of Divine persons onstage in public places, his religious plays were typically staged in churches.25 Browne's productions were often processional in form, using modern theatrical lighting, familiar art, modernized and adapted texts and the form of the liturgy as cues for the responses of his audience; the focus was not academically oriented toward recovering the facts of the original medieval production, but toward providing an effective and affective theatrical experience for his modern audience within the confines of the Church's walls. Like Osgood, he transposed wagon-staged plays

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24E. Martin Browne Two in One (Cambridge: University Press, 1981)

25Browne also produced an anthology of church plays like Osgoode's; see E. Martin Browne Religious Plays for Use in Churches (London: Phillip Allen, 1932) which predictably contained the York Nativity.
'back' into 'liturgical' processions from station to station within the Church:

Having been written for a wagon, they are easily adapted to the open platform which is the natural stage to use in a church and the opportunities for movement from place to place which they offer are welcome, in that they enable the play to move among the congregation, and so become more closely associated with it.... This participation in a common experience, vicariously suffered, is the essence of drama, and also of worship. It is the link between them.26 (Browne Production 16.9)

Browne's work is important, not only because he improved the quality and quantity of productions of medieval plays in England under the restrictions of the Lord Chamberlain, but because he was eventually selected as the Artistic Director of the 1951 production of the York Cycle, the first production of (most of) a whole cycle, of a Passion. The 1951 performance for the York Festival came about as the result of a feeling of widespread spiritual poverty in Britain. For the Festival of Britain, "each city was invited to devise its own contribution, with priority given to celebrations of local antiquities and cultural traditions.... Religion, and especially religious drama played a large and calculated part...." (Elliott 73) Despite the fact that the Lord Chamberlain had "an unblemished record extending over almost two centuries of protecting the Deity from the tarnish of the stage" (Elliott 75), time and family connections made the proposal to stage the York plays for the Festival viable.

The Lord Chamberlain in 1949, Lord Scarborough, happened to be Chairman of the Festival of Britain Committee. Better still, he was also a Yorkshireman. By an even happier stroke of luck, Keith Thomson's [head of the Festival planning committee] grandfather had been, in his time, the Archbishop of York. Purity of motives being assumed on all sides, an informal meeting was arranged at the Archbishop's palace between Thomson, Archbishop Cyril Garbett of York, and the Archbishop of Canterbury. There the Archbishops gave their blessing to the production, in exchange for two guarantees: first, that the plays would be performed on sacred ground, as a religious rather than as a purely theatrical event; and second, that Martin Browne would be appointed to direct them. The Lord Chamberlain was content to accept the Archbishops' decision, obligingly ruling that since the mystery plays had been written prior to the Theatres Act of 1737, they

26E. Martin Browne The Production of Religious Plays (London: Philip Allen, 1932)
therefore fell outside his jurisdiction and need not be submitted for licence. He stipulated only that the cycle be given 'in its traditional form', and that any modernization of the text consist solely of 'word for word substitution of modern for archaic English'. (Elliott 75)

Although obviously Browne was the right man for the job, it is clear that the show he produced was shaped by the strictures which were imposed in gaining permission for the production. It was a religious event designed to have relevance for its twentieth-century audience, not a re-production; and the Purvis text27 reflected this uneasy alliance of past and present by being neither. It is an old text with modern word-substitutions, often distorted and unnatural.

As the Director of the 1951, 1954 and 1957 productions of the York cycle for the York Festival, Browne's vision of the plays had a momentous effect. For nearly all of his huge audience, it was the first time they had seen God onstage and the first time they had witnessed the staging of a passion play. Browne's major concern seemed to have been to bridge the distance between the medieval event and the modern one; to make the show adhere to current standards of continuity, space and performer/audience relations in order to make it acceptable for his audience. Most of his artistic decisions reflected this concern.

The text of the cycle was heavily cut and modernized by J.S. Purvis so that the individual plays were joined into one continuous play - rather than a separate Christ or Mary for each pageant, the same actor took the role throughout the production. Browne claimed that this "speeding up [of] the tempo" and removal of "much of the didactic speechifying" was necessary, "for we are accustomed to a faster flow of action than was the original audience and are more likely to accept what the plays have to say by implication than as direct statement."28 The play which resulted was "essentially a Passion Play, with a Prologue

27Elliott 170 n.13: "The text used in the 1951 production was published as The York Cycle of Mystery Plays: A Shorter Version ed. J.S. Purvis (London: SPCK, 1951). This is now out of print and should not be confused with the currently available Complete Version by Purvis (SPCK, 1957), which is an entirely different translation."

28E. Martin Browne Religious Drama 2: Mystery and Morality Plays Selected and Introduced by E. Martin Browne (NY: Meridien Books, 1958) 315-316.
and Epilogue" (Elliott 78). The Last Supper and Scourging were implied offstage; the nailing to the Cross was "tactfully masked by the grouped banners of the Roman soldiers" (Elliott 77) because "we could probably not endure to see portrayed what the folk of York or Chester watched each year..." 29 The following episodes were excised altogether: Massacre of the Innocents, Purification of Mary, Jesus and the Doctors, Transfiguration, Jesus before Herod, Assumption and Coronation of Mary - one presumes for reasons of taste, doctrine, didacticism, special effect and focus, and time constraint. The language of Purvis' script "turned out to be a conglomerate of Middle and Modern English, often sounding like neither... spoken by almost the entire cast in BBC English." (Elliott 80)

The production was staged in the ruins of St. Mary's Abbey in a linear panorama reminiscent of the famous Valenciennes picture. The broken walls provided both a marvellously gothic backdrop for the stage, which in 1951 contained five mansions and a hell-mouth, and a natural second level for the heavenly thrones of God, Christ and the angels. A triangular stage in the left-hand corner set six and a half feet above ground level permitted the Burial and Harrowing of Hell. The effects were simple and dignified: "Spectacle was largely confined to the crowd scenes... it was also present in the colourful medieval costumes modelled on quattrocento paintings, and in the Abbey ruins themselves, which rose in mute majesty over the players below." (Elliott 79) This staging was designed to allow for very swift movement and complete continuity, so that it was possible to stage the whole history of man in three hours and a half... this is necessary in modern productions if the sweep of the story is to be maintained and the audience's interest is to be held... (Browne Religious Drama 2 310)

Along with the sense of dignity and majestic sweep, another of Browne's artistic objectives was "a light and airy grace" (Browne Religious Drama 2 312); a "faith for weekdays [which] should not wear the pious air of a faith for Sundays only." (Religious Drama 2 306) This avoidance of 'heavy' spirituality produced a sanitized version of the play, which confirmed rather than challenged the faith of its audience. Dorothy Sayers, who (like T.S. Eliot) argued

29E. Martin Browne, "The English Mystery Plays" Drama 43 (Winter 1956) 34-36; this quote 36.
hard for an approach to the plays more toughly religious and dramatic\(^{30}\), pointedly asked

Are we to regard it as an act of worship, as a work of evangelization to the heathen and the uninstructed, or as a means of improving the general aesthetic and intellectual level of the theatre as such? Are we to choose actors for their professional efficiency or for their Christian piety? Are we to aim at doing good, or at doing well? Or what?

Sayers criticized Browne's production for missing a dramatically important doctrinal moment when in order to harrow hell, the door of the sepulchre opened and Christ emerged in his grave-clothes: "after we had once seen the tomb open and the figure of Christ appear, the Resurrection itself, the very centre of the Mystery and the Myth, came as a complete anti-climax." (92) She continued rather scathingly,

it is useless - or at least very difficult - to persuade the average man that Christianity is vital, tough, relevant to life and intellectually urgent, if bad stained glass, sentimental tunes, tweezy little poems and pictures, and woolly undramatic plays have already demonstrated to him all too effectually that it is mere emotional nostalgia, devoid of bones, brains or guts. (93)

Despite this unusual and largely unheard voice, Browne's approach to the plays produced a roaring success.\(^{31}\) The fact that they could be dramatically interesting was demonstrated, and the focus of scholarship began noticeably to shift toward the study of staging methods in order to assimilate it.

A largely unexplored influence on stagings of medieval plays in the 1950's and 1960's is the work of Bertold Brecht\(^{32}\). He argued for a revolutionary theatre in which the


\(^{31}\)Herbert Read "York Mystery Plays" New Statesman and Nation 41 (June 9, 1951) 639-668 criticised the 'BBC English', but he was delighted by the performance.

\(^{32}\)The topic was examined by Garrett Epp, "The York Plays, Brecht and Gestic Writing" Comparative Drama 24:4 (Winter 1990-91) 289-305.
conventions of naturalism were challenged, in which the audience members were provoked to a heightened awareness of themselves as individuals within society, rather than lulled into intellectual acquiescence by a deliberately manipulative emotional experience. It was a theatre of ideas and symbols which tried to force the audience to see and question the reasons for their destinies as the products of societal movements rather than as universally fated outcomes. By destroying the invisible "fourth wall" which enclosed the actors onstage in the illusion of the believable, Brecht "alienated" or separated the audience members' experiences from that which took place on the stage - they could watch and question from the vantage point of their own minds, rather than being swept into sharing the emotional experience of the characters of the play.

Some of these approaches proved fruitful to an understanding by modern scholars of the medieval plays. The removal of naturalism as an aesthetic goal relieved the plays of the old charge of childishness, permitting their violations of Aristotelian notions of space and time to be understood as a sophisticated symbolic structure of ideas. The loss of the fourth wall brought the audience into the action and emphasized the social and communal aspects of production. On some levels, I believe that Brechtian "alienation" somehow explained and soothed the disturbing sense of alterity so often observed in the plays: one might observe the brutalities of the Crucifixion from a detached intellectual point of view rather than being overwhelmed by them.

The essential difference between Brecht and the medieval theatre is that Brecht's plays and criticism came in reaction and as a corrective to a decadent and sentimental bourgeois Victorian theatre; the medieval plays did not. Their criticism, however, did pass through a similar reaction to the theatrical expectations of its Victorian ancestors. Brecht's collected work on the theatre appeared in German in 1957; in English translation in 1964.

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32see for example, Paula Lozar "Time in the Corpus Christi Cycles: 'Aesthetic' and 'Realistic' Modes" Papers on Language and Literature 14:4 (Fall 1978) 385-393. This paper is discussed in Chapter Three.

The York performances of 1960 (dir. David Giles) and 1963 (dir. William Gaskill) were designed on Brechtian lines of 'alienation' and 'epic theatre', productions which were more imaginative and proportionally less popular with the citizens of York. John Elliott says of the revivals:

The development by Brecht of a concept of 'epic theatre' at the very time when the mysteries were making their first appearances was not a coincidence, as Brecht's own acknowledgement of his debt to medieval theatre indicates.... In so far as expressionism has come to be the rule rather than the exception in today's theatre, the mysteries may be said to have ridden the wave of the future and in their own way to have helped to propel it. (Elliott, 142-143)

In 1960, the Christ was crucified with his back to the audience; in 1963, he and the two thieves faced the audience in a production which seized all the opportunities of brutality which the script offered. Most critics panned these productions, and in 1966 Martin Browne resurrected what was essentially his 1951 production. The 1969 show was a nearly all-amateur, all-local-talent production which drew on the local traditions which had been developing since 1951: the sets were architectural and realistic and the costumes were predominantly inspired by paintings from the Italian Renaissance. The performance of 1973 was so little changed that the Times failed to review it. John Elliott explained:

York, by its own estimate, has become the Oberammergau of England, and seems bent on clinging to its formula for success.... slow-paced, reverent, dignified and stylishly archaic. The current director, Edward Taylor, candidly confessed that neither the city council nor the local public would tolerate any departure from past practice, so firmly has 'tradition' become enshrined in York. (Elliott "Godspell" 125)

In 1976 and 1980, the overt religiosity of the play was rejected in favour of "plebian fun", balloons, smoke and spectacle, which many reviewers received condescendingly. The 1996

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(Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1957, 1963) These notes from Willett in paperback, 14th printing, 1979.


36Elliott Playing God 80-100.
production was apparently under the influence of feminist spirituality, and featured a woman in the role of God for the first time ever.27

As the evolutionary assumptions which had shaped early drama scholarship crumbled during the nineteen-fifties, attention gradually and increasingly shifted to the interesting problems raised by imagining and attempting to realize the plays as staged performances. Most of these scholars, who were breaking new ground by envisioning the production values of the original performances, credited the modern performances, especially at York, for their inspiration and re-evaluation of the plays. Eleanor Prosser's approach28, which distinguished literary from dramatic criticism, depended on the ability to imaginatively place one's self as the reader in the medieval audience; much of this desire seemed to stem from the experience of having seen stagings of medieval plays: "E.Martin Browne's production of the York cycle for the Festival of Britain in 1951 (repeated 1954, 1957, and 1960) opened the door on exciting prospects." (Prosser 43) She also credited her academic approach to the experiences of a large production of the Play of Daniel, "a figure of purity yet of passion... It is true drama", and a small production of the Coventry Nativity, "In the unrestrained whoops of laughter and the sudden hush... one could sense... the deep human impact of the medieval mystery."

Glynne Wickham29, who attacked the plays' old image of quaint childishness by exploring their parallels with complex and expensively-staged court pageantry, gave much of the credit for this intellectual movement to the experience of having seen the plays:

37Marci McDonald "Is God a Woman?" MacLean's 109:15 (8 April 1996) 46-51. McDonald reports: "Perhaps the best measure of the emotions at stake... came last month when the director of Britain's six-century old Mystery Plays announced that this year God would be played by a woman - local antique dealer Ruth Ford. The Archdeacon of York, George Austin, promptly denounced it as 'paganism. We are made in God's image,' he declared, 'and not the other way around.'" (McDonald 47)


In recent years, largely because of the interaction of scholarship and Shakespearean production initiated by William Poel... and propagated by the increasing attention given to play production in schools and universities, a realization that the truthful interpretation of all Elizabethan drama is unobtainable without reference to its antecedents has steadily gained ground. (Wickham xiii) The startlingly successful revival of the York and Chester cycles.... has roused suspicion of a possible misjudgment between literary and dramatic values. (Wickham xxvii) The fact that the audiences and the critics who speak for them appear to support these revivals enthusiastically, contrasts so strangely with the words "primitive" "naive" "crude" and such other patronizing epithets of traditional critical evaluation, that modern minds are now keenly awake to the idea that they may have been misinformed. (Wickham 114)

Because the York wagons had been so firmly attached to the 'quaint' vision of the plays which he debunked, Wickham focussed mainly on productions which demonstrably used locus and platea staging. To resolve the puzzling question of how the the obviously sophisticated York plays could have been presented on wagons, Wickham proposed a new model of the pageant wagon, in which a second wagon positioned behind the first provided additional acting space, a changing area and housed the machinery for lifts. This permitted him to avoid Matthew Spencer's 1912 solution of an infinitely large wagon which housed a 'crude' and 'absurd' production.

Wickham's small section on the size and shape of the York pageant wagon inspired Arnold Williams40 to include a slightly longer section of hypotheses and visualizations of the stagings of the cycle plays. Comparing the paintings of the Triumph of Isabella, he concluded regarding the wagons at York and Chester, that "we should then, probably not be too far wrong if we computed the extreme length as eighteen feet, the width as eight." (Williams 98) Despite the difficulties posed by such large-cast plays as the second trial before Pilate, he believed "York is the most suited of all cycles to playing on pageant wagons, for it has more plays and consequently less material and fewer changes of locale in

40Arnold Williams The Drama of Medieval England (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1961)
each play." (Williams 98) He solved the problem of the diminutive stage by allowing that "the action was not confined to the pageant". (Williams 99) Categories like symbolic and naturalistic lost their clarity in the medieval drama: locations were certainly symbolic, and yet onstage violence included the use of prop blood, and "they did not hesitate to give some sort of representation of the greatest miracles and the most sublime mysteries... [It] defies categorization as either symbolic or naturalistic, because it was both." (Williams 103) Despite his fascination with the magnitude and complexity of the staging of the plays ("the municipal authorities and the pageant masters of the guilds spar[ed] no pains to get everything a liberal budget and conscientious supervision could get" (Williams 94)), he was conservative in his estimation of their artistic qualities:

we can recognize that not all of the unknown versifiers whose efforts gave us the scriptural drama of Medieval England were incompetent hacks. (Williams 141)

Williams' curiosity about the wagons sparked a study by M. James Young⁴¹ which tried to form an idea of what the wagons looked like, based upon "the manuscript of the plays... municipal and guild records and from some consistent traditions of art of the period." (M. James Young 2) He decided that the wagons could not have been larger than ten feet wide by twenty feet long; that they "could only have been one story in height, extending some ten to twelve feet above the wagon floor" and that "in no more than two cases is it probable that a second wagon was used. Occasionally actors moved to the ground." (M. James Young 20) Much of the size of his wagons was predicated upon the assumption that both locus and platea were located on board the wagon; the wagon was thus a rolling stage, a "theatre compact and functional, yet aesthetically and theatrically pleasing." (M. James Young 20)

Rosemary Woolf⁴², who examined the cycle plays episodically in their context of art

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and devotional works, credited the experience of having seen performances, especially of York, for some of her appreciation of their artistic quality:

It is not coincidence that the present recognition that the plays are both moving and powerful began with their widespread revival on the stage, following the success of the first York production at the Festival in 1950...

A modern stage... is too large and produces too unenforced an effect for close resemblance to a painting; but the effect of actors dramatically grouped in a medieval wagon must have resembled that of a compartment in a series of frescoes... must have given an effect of a picture-frame just as did the later proscenium arch.... must have appeared exactly as a speaking picture. (Woolf 100-101)

Between 1968 and about 1978 a controversial debate raged about whether the York plays were actually performed on wagons and in procession. It forced the re-examination and eventually inspired the publication of the York records by the Records of Early English Drama; it also inspired academic performances on wagons at Leeds and Toronto. It was resolved in favour of processional performance, and is more completely discussed in Chapter Five.

In 1977, the National Theatre ran a production called The Mysteries which was a combination and adaptation of the York and Towneley plays. The original production focussed on the Passion episodes; in 1980, this became Part II and the Old Testament episodes were added for the Edinburgh Festival. The full play was performed over the course of two evenings to a standing audience. The completed show later appeared in the Cottesloe Theatre and then at the Lyceum and on tour. The show closed in 1985 or 1986 after a very popular run. The production values were self-consciously modern, often parodic rather than pious. Richard Beadle⁴ called it "a most exciting and innovative production, carefully treading the line between the irreverent and the sentimental", and recalled a highlight:

One of its most powerful moments was the Annunciation, in which a black Gabriel, in a sumptuous robe high on a fork-lift truck, picked up the beam

University of California Press, 1980)

from a spotlight in a circular mirror and directed it on Mary kneeling below, staunchly proletarian in wellington boots. (Beadle and King Modern Spelling xxvii)

Darryll Grantley* was less impressed with the popularization of the medieval text, calling it "a desperate chase after comedy.... [which] showed a timid reluctance to exploit the iconography of the plays." He noted that despite the use of such stage devices as a Harrowing of Hell which "developed into a rather silly star wars type conflict, complete with ray guns", the production failed to make use of such stage business as the imprint on Veronica's kerchief, or the use of blood in either the Slaughter of the Innocents or the Crucifixion. He also criticized the music and morris dances which punctuated the show as trite, 'folky' and overly quaint. His review ended with a warning about the seductions of cheap effects:

What all this adds up to is a slick, comic, musical spectacle, which.... ignores the serious artistic and didactic qualities of the medieval religious cycles. In its insistence on quaintness and 'Merrie England' jolliness the production implicitly restates ideas which have for some time been outdated: that it was a rather simple drama performed by unsophisticated men.... if it is allowed to have a real influence on production of early drama it can only be a step backwards.... the temptation to cheap tricks and glitter instead of trust in the text. (Grantley 73)

Production as a means of research became fashionable during the mid-seventies. In 1975, the University of Leeds produced 35 episodes of the York cycle on wagons in the course of three days on a route through three stations. The production demonstrated that the effects of uneven and incidental simultaneous performances were not as debilitating as might be expected; "the overall effect.... is one of desirable variety. (Beadle and King Modern Spelling xxviii)

Clifford Davidson and Nona Mason applied the evidence of art history to the

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contentious area of staging in 1976. They supported Martin Stevens' staging theory, that the plays developed out of *tableaux vivants* and were staged only once in full on the Pavement, because this point of origin in the visual arts reinforced Davidson's art history approach:

If the plays are rooted in the *tableaux vivants*, they must therefore be studied in relation to the forms and techniques of the visual arts. (163)

In this article, however, they made the leap from art as visual aid to actual reconstruction: Stevens and Mason proposed an end-on wagon, in which the hell-mouth rested on the wagon tongue at the front, and God's throne was at the rear. Their estimate of the wagon's size was 7' x 10'; considerably less than James Young's 10' x 20'. The end-on proposal seems to have been linked to the hypothesis that the moving wagon contained a *tableau vivant*. The article contained many useful costuming and design hints drawn from period sources which were geared toward reconstruction in production.

In the spring of 1977, the University of Toronto announced a two-day production of the entire cycle on wagons and in procession through three stations. David Parry, the director of the production, said:

The Leeds production... has shown just how practical the station-to-station wagon presentation of the plays really is. We hope that the production of the full cycle and the more detailed reconstruction of some of the individual wagon-stages in Toronto will remove some of the doubts that have recently

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45Clifford Davidson and Nona Mason "Staging the York Creation and Fall of Lucifer" *Theatre Survey* 17:2 (November 1976) 162-178.

46Davidson noted "The Johnston-Dorrell reconstruction, furthermore, would have been extremely clumsy to move into place from station to station, and also would have been useless as a platform from which to show a *tableau vivant*: only persons on one side of the street would have been able to view it.... Johnston and Dorrell clearly misread "the bakke side," which should indicate the rear of the wagon (see OED, s.v. backside). 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...." (notes 8 and 9, p. 177) See Chapter Five for the Johnston-Dorrell reconstruction.

47David Parry "The York Cycle at the University of Toronto" *REED Newsletter* 1 (1977) 18-19.
been expressed as to the practicability and effectiveness of this method of presentation as it was used in medieval York. (Parry 19)

As a scholarly, rather than a commercial or religious production, this show was motivated and shaped by the staging debate. The production was jointly organized by Records of Early English Drama, which was then in the midst of producing the York records, and Poculi Ludique Societas, a medieval and renaissance drama group which had been staging scholarly productions on the Toronto campus since a graduate seminar taught by Professor John Leyerle in 1964. The forty-seven pageants were assigned to a variety of academic and local groups, loosely guided in terms of style and context (the "date" of production was set in 1485) and provided with the use of wagons and some costumes by PLS. PLS acquired eleven wagons and built elaborately carved 5' x 8' platforms equipped with trap doors; the wagon for the Judgement episode was configured according to the recently-discovered Mercers' Indenture with a second level and a windlass-operated swing lift. The wagons and some of the costumes were rotated. The production, which was scheduled for October 1 and 2, was broken into two days on the assumption that a modern audience would not turn up at 4:30 a.m., or last for the predicted fourteen hours of show time. A medieval fair with vendors and morris dancers was also arranged to provide a holiday atmosphere. Unfortunately, it rained. The first ten performances went off outdoors, at which point a torrential (and as it turned out, all day) downpour drove the remainder inside, where a single wagon was set up as stage and each production raised and struck their sets on it; this resulted in an overall delay of about five hours. The performances scheduled for the second day did happen outdoors. The quality of performances varied from regrettable to magnificent. Although it was originally planned as a demonstration that processional staging was a feasible staging method, the production turned out to be more useful as a demonstration of the differences between the mechanics of indoor and outdoor performance.

Reviews of the show varied quite a lot. Harry Lane criticized it heavily, insisting

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that historical re-creation should be illusionistic:

Such an attempt as this at historical re-creation faces a number of serious problems with regard to the completeness and complexity of recreation to be attempted and the control that is required to prevent any major lapse from making the entire illusion collapse. A serious historical re-creation is surely a conscious and deliberate artifice in which a historical moment is re-created as completely as possible. What one saw of this medieval fair was suspiciously redolent of the clichés of "Merrie England" that travel agents still depend on. (Lane 103)

For Lane the variations in quality and approach from play to play spoiled the illusion of a single performance: "inadequacies of acting, costume and staging succeeded only in suggesting the old fiction that our medieval ancestors were quaint, naive and acutely lacking in visual sophistication" (Lane 104) and the inclusion of the fair drew the academic quality of the day down to an unacceptably plebeian level: "If we are to explore the feasibility and demands of staging this huge cycle on wagons, we must do so carefully and seriously, unhindered by competition from a medieval fair." (Lane 106) John Velz⁴⁹ asserted that the day was "more than a casual aesthetic experience or a sentimental indulgence by anachronists. In a real sense, it was a research experiment..." (Velz 49) Velz commented on the profound differences between outdoor and indoor aesthetics:

Worse than this neat total collapse of timetable was the loss of the sense of living theatre outdoors as the audience moved about from station to station, or from station to the medieval fair which was going on simultaneously. Aesthetic distance between actors and audience was almost non-existent outdoors, all too obvious indoors: what had been the immanence of God's hand in the world was suddenly a mere spectacle when we left the street and mobility for the auditorium and stasis.... How immediate the plays are when produced under medieval conditions was the most impressive lesson the Toronto production taught. (Velz 50)

Sheila Lindenbaum⁵⁰ compared the effect of this style of production with that of its

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predecessor, the triennial productions of the truncated cycle at York:

While using medieval costumes and the ruins of St. Mary's Abbey church as a setting, the York Festival productions have taken the easy course of translating the cycle into an essentially modern theatrical idiom. The forty-seven pageants have typically been compressed into a continuous drama with a single "story line" and performed in a style one reviewer has described as a mélange of Oberammergau Passion Play, pre-Raphaelite tableaux, and twentieth-century church drama. (Lindenbaum 32)

Although the show had been conceived to test the theory that the plays were staged processionally, which had been challenged by Alan Nelson and Martin Stevens, it "could only test the general effect.... a rich and fluid theatrical environment" (Lindenbaum 33) which "differed from the compartmentalized scenes in art as a result of the shifting line between actors and audience and the movement of wagons within the ebb and flow of the procession." (Lindenbaum 34) Like Velz, Lindenbaum agreed that "the lines between actors and audience were more firmly drawn in the indoor auditorium.... a greater professionalism also seemed required indoors" (Lindenbaum 34) and that "the staging was most effective when it established a telling relationship between the audience and the play." (35) This relationship, she argued, must not be an illusionistic suspension of disbelief because this expectation leads to an unreasonably negative view of the plays: "early critics of medieval drama... found the cycles crude and naive because they judged them according to the criteria of illusionistic plays." (Lindenbaum 37) Lindenbaum also criticized the text, which "imposed a perverse kind of stylistic unity... a monotonous and often incomprehensible modern English translation, oddly the one made by J.S. Purvis for the very differently conceived York Festival revivals." (Lindenbaum 39)

Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama51 published a series of reviews. David Bevington was enthusiastic about the method of distributing the plays among groups: "the conception of the whole was simply breathtaking, and the plan of distributing individual

51The York Cycle at Toronto: October 1 and 2, 1977" reviews by David Bevington, Kathleen Ashley, Peter Meredith, Gail McMurray Gibson and Thomas Hahn. Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama 20 (1977) 107-121. Textual citations for these reviews appear as follows: author RORD 20 page.
pageants among disparate acting groups, more or less in imitation of the guild assignments in medieval England, made its point with extraordinary effectiveness." (Bevington RORD 20 109) He noted a sharp differentiation between the quality of production of academic and church groups: "spectators concluded that college acting groups... knew what they were about, while Church groups were at sea." (Bevington RORD 20 109-110) Kathleen Ashley attributed the flaws in the production not to failure on the part of the producers, but rather to a modern context in which correlations between private and public, secular and sacred, are difficult to perceive.... Presumably medieval audiences before the age of thoroughgoing naturalism were able to respond in a manner both complex and unified, holding at once an awareness of guild affiliation and Biblical import. (Ashley RORD 20 110-111)

Peter Meredith pointed out the "absence of unity... replaced with... a pattern of individual incidents.... What unity there is within the story is simply the story.... It is within the individual pageant that dramatic unity lies." (Meredith RORD 20 112-113) Meredith compared the production with that in 1975 at Leeds; while the weather was delightful at Leeds, only 35 of the plays were mounted on dressed wagons, plain wagons, and some on no wagon at all.

At Leeds, The Road to Calvary was particularly successful as a "no-wagon" pageant. The starkness which the absence of the wagon produced, the harshness of the real road surface upon which Christ fell, the Bruegesselque proximity and reality of the crowd/audience, all revealed the possible effectiveness of the method. (Meredith RORD 20 113)

Gail McMurray Gibson commented on the visual quality of the production, in which "the familiar iconography of a hundred late-medieval Visitation paintings was mysteriously transformed to living and speaking image" (Gibson RORD 20 115), and the magical sense of transcending time: "For a few seconds, the shivering modern spectators seemed transformed to that other marvelling crowd in holiday mood, that crowd lining Coney Street

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or Micklegate or The Pavement as the pageant wagons played and passed." (Gibson RORD 20 117) Thomas Hahn commented on the audience and its reactions:

The primary levels on which shifts between illusion and reality occurred concerned local perceptions - notice attracted by the outdoor setting, weather, staging, props, the activities of other members of the audience.... Much of the participation and perception at this level necessarily disappeared when the plays moved indoors. (Hahn RORD 20 118)

Some of the reactions which a medieval audience would predictably have had were lost because of modern unfamiliarity with iconography. The audience also differed from a medieval one in that they "lacked the civic and confraternal ties that bound the original audience together" (Hahn RORD 20 120), and while receptive, "they could hardly have duplicated the mood of holyday and holiday, of feast and celebration that medieval spectators felt." (Hahn RORD 20 120) For Hahn, the plays failed when "they relied on the wooden solemnity and high seriousness often, and unfittingly, associated with medieval art." (Hahn RORD 20 120) and succeeded in the moments when "it is our consciousness, not of fiction, but of personal involvement and of the reality of the event, that pleases." (Hahn RORD 20 119)

Alexandra Johnston53, who was instrumental in organizing the cycle, commented a year later on the experience. She asserted that the production had been

not a re-creation, but an experiment. It will take many more experiments before anyone concerned with staging problems presented by the York Cycle will be able to say with confidence that the 'historical' facts have been sufficiently established to allow for that re-creation. (Johnston "York Cycle" 2)

The historical organizational method of divided episodes proved in practice to be self-explanatory:

not only is it possible to produce the York Cycle using forty-seven separate groups, it is the only way to produce it. Only by dividing the responsibility

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among the guilds could the city council produce this enormous play annually for almost two hundred years. (Johnston "York Cycle" 3-4)

The fragmenting of characterization which resulted from having many actors portray the same character had the effect of focussing the audience's attention:

Because there was no identification of an actor with a character, the audience was thus denied the luxury of emotional identification with a character through an actor. Identification and so engagement was with the real events behind the representation. (Johnston "York Cycle" 4)

The puzzling question of amateur versus professional actors gained a possible solution in the dynamic of the text: "it appeared that some of the plays were deliberately written to depend heavily on one or perhaps two actors while demanding a cast of considerable size to speak one or two lines." (Johnston "York Cycle" 5-6) The most memorable effect of the play, which Johnston was fortunate enough to view from the inside, was the blending of play-world with real world.

the interaction of the participants.... that contributed to our sense of common experience.... For those of us more intimately involved.... there were.... ties that created curious resonances.... an extraordinary sense of community. (Johnston "York Cycle" 6)

It was beyond expectations, especially theatrical conventions;

a mimetic situation without known conventions.... There can be no illusion in this form of theatre that what is portrayed is 'real'.... [it] does not attempt to 'deceive' the audience. Rather, the York Cycle seeks to allow them to 'conceive'.... to perform the Cycle is to take part in an act of community, of celebration and of worship. It was not an historical re-creation, but a contemporary event. (Johnston "York Cycle" 8)

The 1977 York cycle at Toronto stimulated research and discourse in several new directions: the mechanical basics of performing medieval theatre effectively, audience interaction and reception, new definitions of 'unity'.

A meeting at Lancaster in 1980 provided the opportunity for nuts and bolts discussion about the possibilities of the pageant wagon and the basis for the first two issues of a new journal dedicated to the performance issues of medieval drama: Medieval English Theatre.
One participant commented on a new "sense of the actuality of the pageant wagon: that these remarkable vehicles really did exist, with all their technical problems and very real technical achievements." (Twycross 4) Phillip Butterworth explored the intricacies of fifteenth-century wheel-making and based on the records, explained how the Mercers' wagon must have looked and functioned. He noted that the 1464 Mercers' wagon had bound wheels, despite city ordinances which restricted the use of iron-bound vehicles, that the axles were fixed to the underside of the carriage and the wheels revolved around them, that the vehicle was probably moved by a combination of pushing and pulling with the wheels exposed as surfaces to be manipulated, and that the "potting stang" of the records was a pole used as a lever to aid in turning and braking.

Peter Meredith presented an improved version of the Johnston and Dorrell reconstruction of the 1433 Mercers' wagon, in which the iron pieces were used to construct the second or "heaven" level, rather than as the four posts which held it up. This design provided some advantages in durability and storage purposes, and corresponded more closely with the known uses of iron as a structural element in the fifteenth century. His reconstruction was based on the records published by the REED project, and necessarily involved some discussion of how the records should be read, and what information they actually provided; a great deal was necessarily conjecture, complicated by the spelling and vocabulary of the records: for example,

The spelling of the 1526 inventory is appalling and has had its own offspring

54Meg Twycross, editorial, Medieval English Theatre 1 (1979) 3-4.


of problems. Johnston and Dorrell interpret "char"t ("Wants j char") as a cart. I don't think there's any doubt it's a shirt, "sark" cum "shert", and a pageant wagon has been created out of it. (Meredith "Mercers" 16)

His method worked toward likely approximation rather than "truth":

I don't think we shall ever be absolutely one hundred per cent sure what the wagon looked like, and in many cases there are going to be details, perhaps important details, which we shall never find out; but we can work out what is likely." (Meredith "Mercers" 8)

This is a useful distinction, and one which the publication of the records has caused to be uttered frequently in the past fifteen years.

David Parry58, the Artistic Director of the 1977 performance, noted some of the surprising discoveries which the experiment had provided: the wagons were easy to move and to stabilize, and the 12' x 6' acting deck was sufficiently spacious; virtually no time was required between wagons, but a gap occurred after the wagon was in position, while the corner braces and stairs were put into place which was probably the space covered by the many long prologues; visibility was less a concern outdoors than indoors, because people constantly moved, went for food and returned, followed a favourite play, watched from every conceivable angle. The rigidity of sight lines and inappropriate interruptions (like wandering dogs) only became problematic indoors. References to weather in the plays suddenly became charged, and the wagons themselves contributed to the overall aesthetic sense of the play's meaning:

... one of the effects of the framing of these wagon stages is to give us something of the same effect that we get in late medieval art, where there is often action spilling out of the frames, but the frames are always there with the sense that this is the inner reality of things. (Parry 26)

The branch of critical theory known as performance criticism has been a direct result of the development of the use of performance as a research tool in medieval drama studies.

In *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, C.E. McGee defined it as follows:

Knowledge of theatrical conditions provides the basis for one basic form of performance criticism, that of readers whose work with plays involves a deliberate sustained act of the imagination to envision the play, a verbal construct, vocalized and enacted on the stage in the presence on an audience. But many performance critics go beyond a reading of this sort, however informed, sensitive and imaginative it may be. 'Reconstructing' the stage for which the play was first written.... they use performance as a method of research; teachers and students at the University of Toronto have regularly explored medieval English drama this way, building 'medieval' pageant wagons for the York Cycle in 1977. (McGee 135)

The use of performance as a research tool has affected the field in numerous ways: it has directed scholarly attention to the relations of performers and audience, to the play as a series of historical events rather than merely a text, to the sophisticated dramatic qualities of its text, and to the religious and cultural complexities of the society which produced it. Additionally, the techniques of producing effective medieval drama have been learned and honed by a culture of scholars who have specialized in this form of research. Like criticism, performance also has its fashions and modes; unlike it, a good performance is an ephemeral experience shared only by those present. While it stimulates thought about the plays, the discourse inspired by performances is necessarily restricted to those fortunate enough to have attended. A second drawback of performance scholarship is the dangerous illusion that what works onstage in an academic production must indicate what happened in the original, historical productions; the past can lose its sharp contours and be simplified into costume-defined alterity. As McGee points out, there is a "need for performance critics to attend to the status and the use of theatre as a body of signifying practices that confirms ideologically prescribed ideas of character, realism and significance." (McGee 138) I believe that in order

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60 The journal *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* carries a regular supplement of reviews of medieval drama performances which is helpful; but I believe that description cannot replace experience. I have participated in performances with the Poculi Ludique Societas for six years in a variety of roles.
for performance to provide a useful research tool, great attention must be given to the visual
details of the production and the records which correspond to it. Despite the impossibility
of achieving a perfectly accurate vision of the original, modern period performances have
provided both imaginative stimulus and a testing ground which has demonstrated the
mechanical and emotional possibilities which the original productions must have had.
Chapter Five

The Great Staging Controversy and the Records of Early English Drama

During the late 1960s and early ‘70s, a fierce debate raged among academic specialists in the field of medieval drama on the topic of the staging of the York cycle. The traditional evolutionary underpinnings which had supported the basic understanding of the plays until about 1955 had been challenged; the ‘eye-witness’ account of the Chester plays contained in the Rogers’ Breviaries was no longer secure evidence of anything; it had become clear that the once-universal model of pageant-wagon staging was inapplicable in the cases of most other medieval English playtexts. Alan Nelson now asked how in the world all of the plays of the York cycle could have been performed at multiple stations and on separate pageant wagons, and possibly accompanied or preceded by a liturgical procession of the Host, in one day. The experience of the plays in performance had seeped into the scholarly imagination to the extent that the event which the text of the Register recorded was now conceivable and therefore logistically questionable. Nelson answered his question by re-imagining the pageants as a procession of elaborate displays which paused briefly at each station to identify themselves before gathering at some final point for one performance of the play as a whole, a separate event from the procession. The very existence of processional staging, which had long been perceived as the defining characteristic of English medieval dramaturgy, was challenged. At the heart of the matter lay the relationships of the Corpus Christi guild, procession, performance and Register. The controversy caused the text and records to be intently re-examined; new records were discovered, new productions were staged, and most importantly, new questions were asked of the information which had been available all along. The manuscripts containing the York civic records were studied carefully and the matter relating to performance was published. This process of interrogating the records led to a fundamentally altered understanding of the play and its circumstances. The following chapter examines in greater detail Nelson’s theory, the opposition to it as the controversy developed over the course of several years, and the Records of Early English Drama project which was its result. This is an interesting period in the history of York cycle
scholarship because it is the time of the most intense advancement of knowledge in slightly over a century.

Along with the groundbreakind works of Gardiner and Salter, Nelson's challenge was based upon Richard Southern's work on the *Castle of Perseverance* in *The Medieval Theatre in the Round*¹, which examined a previously-overlooked staging method: on multiple stages, but in one fixed location, in which the scaffolds for the audience's seating were arranged in a circle and interspersed with the multiple stages required by that play. This method obviously required large amounts of organization, funding and professional theatrical ability; by replacing the time-honoured image of a quaint parade of tiny bible plays on wagons Southern demonstrated once again that the roots of English drama were clearly neither small-scale nor amateur. Moreover, this model provided a documentable (in this case) and somewhat more practical solution to the logistical problems raised by the attempt to reconstruct medieval staging. Southern's model was enthusiastically accepted by the scholarly community and promptly applied to the other existing pieces of medieval English drama. In 1961, Martial Rose² suggested an in-the-round style of presentation for the Towneley plays, basing much of his argument upon his own reconstructed performance of the play. Rose raised a series of questions about the York cycle which he did not attempt to answer:

The plays, as tradition has it, were performed at a number of different stations in York, the whole cycle being presented at each successive station. The number of stations varied: in 1417 there were twelve, in 1519 there were fourteen, and in 1554 sixteen... The playing of 273 lines, including the music and the movement, would take about fifteen minutes. At the first station, allowing five minutes for the time taken between the end of one pageant and the beginning of another, the whole cycle would last for about fifteen hours; if it started at 4:30 a.m. it would finish at 7:30 p.m. At the second station, allowing five minutes for the journey and five minutes for the combined preparation for the journey at the first station and for the playing at the second - and we have to bear in mind that these are horse-drawn pageants making their way in procession not at a gallop - performance would begin at


4:55 a.m. and the cycle would finish at 7:55 p.m. At this rate the first pageant would begin at 9:50 a.m. at the twelfth station and the last would finish just after midnight. It must be recognized that these estimates are almost impractically conservative, and the pace at which such a schedule could be maintained would put an intolerable strain on both performers and spectators. Yet the records indicate that fifty-seven plays were performed at sixteen different stations. The processional street-pageant staging of the York cycle has been too readily accepted without due consideration given to the practical problems. (Rose 24)

Rose also referred to the "practical impossibility of performing the whole cycle at a number of stations in the compass of a day" (Rose 24) and suggested that since the York schedule shown earlier for the station to station playing is scarcely practicable, the stations at some stage may have been used not as acting areas for performance of the whole cycle, but rather as stopping places during the procession at which each pageant presented its scene in tableau. (Rose 25)

Because Rose's subject was Wakefield and not York, he pursued the topic no further in relation to York; but his questions formed the essence of Nelson's argument.

On December 29 1968, at the meeting of conference 53 of the Modern Language Association, Alan Nelson presented a paper which addressed Rose's questions scientifically by applying mathematics to determine the question of how long the performance took. Nelson's formulas were based on the reasoning that not all plays in the cycle were equally long: before a play could advance, the station ahead had to be cleared of the play which was being performed there. He proposed a system of 'modified free advances' in which the first play of the cycle advanced at the rate of the longest play in the cycle, and each succeeding play then advanced as soon as it could. In a calculation based on this model, which accounted for the lengths of all the plays, number of plays in the cycle, number of stations, and time required to move from one to the next, Nelson concluded

if the York cycle were begun at 5:00 a.m. on Corpus Christi day, it would not be able to finish before 2:15 a.m., the next day. True-processional staging cannot be regarded as dramatically convenient or as a natural way to permit a play to be viewed by a larger audience. It is in fact extraordinarily cumbersome. If the York cycle was performed during the daylight hours, then something must have been sacrificed: either the cycle was not played at all stations, or not all audiences saw all plays, or the plays were seen out of order, or at least not from beginning to end at all stations. (Nelson "Conference 53" 87)

To make sense of this cumbersome quality, Nelson suggested that

a liturgical Corpus Christi procession, with pageant vehicles sporting *tableaux vivants* must have given rise to the plays. But since a dramatic production is totally and utterly incompatible with a liturgical procession, the plays could only have been produced after the procession had finished or had separated from the pageants. Then, either the plays actually and awkwardly retained some processional characteristics or we have misunderstood and confused the evidence. (Nelson "Conference 53" 88)

Nelson's challenge was the topic of intense discussion at that seminar: when the meeting was adjourned (far over its time limit), it was agreed only that "it was clearly necessary to go back and consider the problem of perceiving the production as a whole." (Kahrl "Conference 53" 92)

In the 1969 MLA session⁴, A.C. Cawley defended the traditional conception of the pageant wagons, asking for further study of "the wagon in relation to the acting stations." He noted L.M. Clopper's Ph.D. thesis, which suggested that wagons in Chester were placed alongside stable stationary scaffolds, which provided an enlarged playing space. (Cawley "Seminar 17" 205) He concluded in reference to the title of his paper, that "the circular theatre is a monstrously heavy machine which threatens to crush other medieval forms of theatre." (Cawley "Seminar 17" 207)

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⁴Stanley Kahrl and Sheila Lindenbaum. "Informal Minutes of Seminar 17" *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 13-14 (1970-71) 203-220. Because this article records the comments of multiple speakers, textual citations appear as follows: (speaker "seminar 17" page). Cawley pre-circulated a paper titled "Presentation of the Wakefield Plays"; his presentation at the session (reproduced in the minutes) was a comment on this paper titled "Pageant Wagon Versus Juggernaut Car".
Alan Nelson commented about his own pre-circulated paper on Wakefield: "the Wakefield cycle was probably produced in the round at a single station, and was probably not mounted in true processional fashion." (Nelson "Seminar 17" 214) In the paper itself he said of York:

A detailed study of records from medieval York has convinced me that from at least the middle of the fifteenth century, the phenomenon known as the York Corpus Christi play consisted of two distinct events presented on the same day. Beginning at 4:30 a.m., a procession of pageants was shown through the streets of the town, each pageant stopping briefly before each of the twelve or more stations situated along the way. These processional presentations must have been expository in nature, consisting of short speeches perhaps two or four stanzas in length. Beginning in the early afternoon, when the procession was entirely ended, the plays from the dramatic cycle were presented by the crafts to the worthies of the town, who were gathered with their guests in the great hall of some private hall in York.5 (Nelson "Seminar 17" 203)

Essentially, Nelson's understanding of the plays separated the elements of movement and performance: the procession was a display of nearly motionless pictures, a kind of advertisement for the full show, which was performed only once, privately.

An interesting comment at the end of this seminar illustrates the growing rift in approaches to the past:

Upon the conclusion of Professor Nelson's remarks, Professor Potter responded briefly to Professor Cawley's paper in turn... that medieval producers may have been more willing to live with waste and inefficiency than we have been willing to concede. In response, Professor Cawley stated "Waste and inefficiency don't worry me, and I doubt if they worried medieval Englishmen." (Kahrl and Lindenbaum "Seminar 17" 220)

Nelson's article6 was published in 1970. In it he concentrated on demonstrating, by means of the use of complicated mathematical formulas, that the form of staging which he defined as "true processional" (having at least two plays, at least two audiences, with plays


arranged and played in serial order, to audiences arranged in serial order) was too impossibly unwieldy a method to have been used in York. The article made little reference to the specific details of the text of the plays, the geography of the city or the York records; it focussed upon the development of the formulas which would enable the prediction of play movements. To those which he had discussed at the 1968 MLA conference, he added the factors of length of the longest play in the cycle, time required to move between stations (100 lines), and time required to set up a play which had arrived and was waiting (20 lines), concluding still that

Even if the York cycle begins promptly at five o'clock in the morning and the procession is omitted, and even if there is no hitch in an event encompassing 576 separate dramatic presentations, the last play cannot possibly finish at the last station before quarter past two the following morning. (Nelson "Principles" 315)

For the first time, he also discussed what he termed "bunching", the practice of moving a group of two or more smaller pageants together as a block in order to even out variations in length. He ultimately discarded the idea on the logic that the grouping had to be precisely equal to the length of the longest play:

In the York cycle, the sum of plays 1 through 4, including pauses, is 501 lines, less than the longest play. The sum of plays 1 through 5 is 696 lines, more than the longest play, even counting its journey. If play 1 begins at the next station each time play 5 ends at the last, then the rest of the plays in the entire cycle will perform at each station at the same 696 line intervals... the primary disadvantage is that any such "bunching" normally results, as here in a "composite" play longer than the longest play, and the additional length will be reflected twelvefold in the total length of the production. (Nelson "Principles" 314-315)

This desire to make the plays or play-segments uniform in length caused the argument to double back upon itself: "conversely, inequality in length may be taken as partial evidence that a cycle was not intended for true-processional production." (Nelson "Principles" 309)

One feature of the York cycle which Nelson did not discuss is the fact that many of the plays

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7The idea was proposed by Maurice Hussey in The Chester Mystery Plays (London, 1957) x-xi.
begin with a long monologue. He assumed that

one play cannot begin to perform the instant the preceding play finishes. Even if the play is on hand "waiting in the wings," it must wait until the first play clears the stage area, and then it must set up its own stage or draw up its pageant wagon. Another longer pause occurs as a play makes its way from one station to the next. (Nelson "Principles" 307)  

These pauses of 20 and 100 lines added significantly to Nelson's totals and were not always justifiable. Nelson concluded that the irregularities in performance time would "extend the full production beyond endurance" (Nelson "Principles" 306) and that in general "true-processional production does not recommend itself as a method of staging a play" (Nelson "Principles" 315), suggesting instead that single-stage performance "is the rule in drama, and most medieval plays were performed before only one audience." (Nelson "Principles" 316)  
The article did not explain this single York performance any further, stating only that

It is necessary to abandon traditional preoccupations about the special nature of English cycles and to engage in a comparative study of plays and processions from all over England, including London, and from Cornwall, Scotland, France, Italy, Spain, Flanders, and Germany. (Nelson "Principles" 317)

Nelson's work clearly gave a tremendous boost to the development of medieval drama scholarship: he pushed for the re-evaluation of old ideas and for the incorporation of continental evidence, an area sorely lacking. While his formulas were perhaps overly rigid, and not firmly enough based in textual and historical evidence, they did force the scholarly community to try to imagine the mechanics of re-creating a processional cycle: a valuable exercise which stimulated a great deal of further discussion and research, from which the York cycle emerged as a unique form of organization and presentation, rather than typical

An August 1995 PLS production of the four York Nativity plays in procession demonstrated that these monologues may be begun as soon as the preceding play finishes, to fill the time required to move the preceding wagon away and bring the next wagon to the site. Additionally, not all of the dialogue of every play needs to take place on the wagon; the actors may start at street level and move up when the wagon is prepared. Many of the plays feature the theme of movement or journey and climax with a display. The movement of wagons must have involved a much more complex and forgiving choreography than that Nelson envisioned.
of medieval English drama.

In 1971, a sizable portion of Leeds Studies in English was occupied with studies of the York records. A new document had surfaced: the 1433 indenture of the York Mercers and their pageant-masters. The indenture provided "a definitive inventory of the properties of the pageant" (Johnston "Mercers 1433" 28), a listing of costumes, and some hints of the "colourful lavishness" of the Doomsday pageant. Margaret Dorrell, a student of Arthur Cawley's, provided a records study of the pageant of "The Coronation of the Virgin"10, which demonstrated that this pageant was uniquely favoured with a small subsidy from the Mayor because

Originally the responsibility for the pageant was sustained by the mayor and his brethren... It seems that by 1468, at the latest, the Mayor delegated his responsibility to the Innholders... the Mayor kept up his traditional association with the play by giving the new producers a token subsidy of 2s. (Dorrell "Coronation" 45)

Both of these studies provided a new sense of historical development, of the legal and financial interactions between the citizens of York which affected the texture and appearance of the production over the years.

In 1972, nearly all of Leeds Studies in English was given over to York. Johnston and Dorrell11 collaborated on a detailed study of the Mercers' pageant which was based upon a new examination of the documents of the Mercers' company. It argued for processional performance by tracing the known details of the wagons' upkeep, appearance and replacement from 1433 to 1526, including the first conjectural sketch of the wagon, and transcriptions (with translations) of the pertinent documents. This study removed the old misapprehension that the Mercers had also been in charge of the Paternoster play:


examination of the Pageant-masters' 1443 Ordinance under ultra-violet light revealed that
the pertinent passage had been over-written in the late nineteenth century so that "pe pat' noster-play" concealed the words "pair play"; simply, the Doomsday pageant with which the guild had always been associated.

Martin Stevens provided an article\(^\text{12}\) expanding on Nelson's ideas. Assuming for the same reasons that Nelson did that the concept of processional staging was a "myth... based largely on some undigested records from York" (Stevens "Procession" 37), he proposed first that the performance of the late fourteenth century was different in detail, if not in basic form, from that which prevailed in the heyday of the craft cycles some 150 years later. Secondly... the possibility that the actual performance did not bear a very close resemblance to the surviving manuscript. (Stevens "Procession" 43)

Stevens' hypothesis was as follows:

Sometime in the middle of the fourteenth century, the various trade guilds in York began to represent appropriate biblical scenes on pageant wagons which were drawn over a prescribed route in the city as part of the Corpus Christi procession. Beginning as *tableaux vivants*, these scenes gradually included a few spoken lines, but until at least 1426, they were not independent plays and they bore only a skeletal resemblance to the collected pageants of the York register. The latter did not come into existence until the second half of the fifteenth century, at which time the religious procession and the Corpus Christi play had clearly become established as separate events taking place on consecutive days. A dramatic procession continued to be held on the day of the play with short enactments of scenes before the houses of burgesses who had paid for the privilege, but in time a longer or more detailed version of some or all of the cycle was given at the last stop on the route, the Pavement, where the general public gathered. Eventually, the major roles in this longer version were assumed by professionals. The guilds continued to provide the pageant wagons, which were drawn into place as needed to represent *sedes* in the stationary performance. The play itself undoubtedly changed in substance from year to year as guilds flourished and declined. There is no reason to believe that the entire cycle as preserved in the MS was ever presented, but it seems clear that certain pageants - the Mercers' Judgement play, to cite one instance - were included in each performance. The scripts for the individual plays were preserved in manuscript or in

memory by the individual guilds. The register, in turn, was compiled by the city fathers in an early effort to collect and preserve archives of the city. (Stevens "Procession" 44)

Stevens' method separated the various strands of evidence which were ordinarily understood in reference to each other. Like the Register, which did not necessarily reflect any one specific performance, Burton's 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." (Stevens "Procession" 52) Stevens also suggested the idea of "clustering", particularly in the case of the Nativity pageants, in which several pageants gathered to perform a composite drama. This gathering would have reached its greatest extent in what Stevens proposed as the "actual" standing performance on the Pavement, of which "the surviving register is, in fact, a somewhat idealized text" (Stevens "Procession" 52). The rationale for his idea was in evolutionary theory, the attempt to place the surviving evidence in a chronological scheme of gradually increasing complexity in order to explain its existence. Stevens wrote,

the conjectured standing performance at the Pavement could not have arisen suddenly but rather must have evolved over a period of years.... why is the manuscript divided into so many apparently self-sufficient pageants if the play was really one continuous dramatic performance? The answer... lies in the evolution of the Corpus Christi Play in York and in its underlying sponsorship. (Stevens "Procession" 54, 56)

The rebellion against old assumptions in this case incorporated one of the oldest.

Stevens' article was followed by a pair of articles by Margaret Dorrell. The first study was a presentation, in Latin with English translation, of the five documents which refer to the procession and play before their separation to different days in 1427. Dorrell argued that before 1427, the procession, although held on the same day as the plays, was a separate event which preceded the plays. Regarding the A/Y book, which Nelson had argued indicated a procession following the play because the torch list follows the Ordo Paginarum, Dorrell replied "Their order in A/Y cannot be seen to reflect an order of events in the Corpus

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13 Margaret Dorrell "Two Studies of the York Corpus Christi Play" Leeds Studies in English 6 (1972) 63-111.
Christi celebration because the proclamation, which was entered last, was issued on the vigil of the feast." (Dorrell "Two Studies" 70) Even the Mayor's party, which was recorded as carrying torches in the procession and watching the play from the Common Hall, could manage to do both:

By 4:30 Matins and Mass could have been said in Holy Trinity and the torch bearers could then have set off just as the first pageant began to play at the first station. The religious procession would then have had an unimpeded progress to the Minster and then to St. Leonard's. Even allowing for a ceremonious leaving of the Host in the Minster, the whole procession need not have taken more than an hour (until 5:30 a.m.). The progress of the first pageant was meanwhile much slower since it had to stop along the route to perform. The first pageant did not reach the eighth station along the route at the Common Hall until 6:02 a.m.; they would have had ample time to return to the Common Hall before the pageant arrived.

Dorrell thus argued for a separate and unrelated procession preceding the play, which of course would have been much more practical than Nelson's model because the play's length would not have interfered with the much-faster procession.

The second article addressed Nelson's challenge to processional staging. Dorrell again based her argument upon transcribed records extracts, which indicated that "the council intended that the play should be completed in a single day, and that by playing at a limited number of stations and by exercising all possible speed between stations, the performing crafts were able to accomplish this." (Dorrell "Two Studies" 88) In her examination of the stations, Dorrell explained that the route was established by long tradition (and provided a map thereof); that the City profited by leasing stations for performance as is evident in surviving records from 1454-5 to 1576-7; that these revenues fell in the sixteenth century as a result of the general economic decline of York's fortunes as a trading centre and that at the first station, the Common clerk had the assigned duty of keeping the register. Having established these points, Dorrell then presented a reconstruction of the performance in procession which was based upon the topography of the York streets. Her formula differed from Nelson's in the following ways: the time between stations allowed by Nelson was 100 lines, or six minutes for each station; based upon a walking tour of the area, and leaving extra time for negotiating corners and hills, Dorrell found that three of these trips took only two
minutes, three took three, two took four, and three took five. Additionally, the twenty lines which Nelson counted as set-up time were deleted since the monologues which preface many of the plays could have been begun the moment the previous play ended and continued while their own pageants were being set up. Finally the first performance was assumed to have begun at 4:30 a.m. rather than 5:00 a.m. Dorrell's calculations showed that actors in every pageant except 1, 5, 9, 10, 11, 18, 26 and 31 had short breaks after they reached the station at which they were to perform next. There were breaks for the audiences, except at station 1, between pageants 4 and 5, 8 and 9, 9 and 10, 10 and 11, 17 and 18, 25 and 26. It should also be noted that although many pageants were delayed between stations because of a long-playing station ahead of them, the calculations show that at no time were there more than two pageants waiting between any two stations.... If it began at 4:30 a.m. on Corpus Christi day and, if the crafts obeyed the instructions about moving as quickly as possible between stations, the last pageant would finish playing at the last station at about twenty-nine minutes past midnight. (Dorrell "Two Studies" 98)

Dorrell's calculations demonstrated that an actor might possibly play three parts, thus making the injunction against that practice a sensible one and they confirmed that the Fergus play would indeed have been played after dark. She concluded "the records show that the performance was a spoken one, and imply that each pageant was performed at each station." (Dorrell "Two Studies" 101)

Stevens responded to Dorrell in a short postscript which was included in the same issue. He accused Dorrell of having addressed the cycle only after 1426, and of not explaining or attempting to explain the mechanics of how the cycle and procession got finished when they ran on the same day, beyond asserting that the procession preceded the cycle. Stevens criticized her article because "we are left with no more specific a notion of how the York play developed and no clear picture of the sequence of events... than we ever had." (Stevens "Postscript" 113) Dorrell's refusal to theorize on the relations of play and procession was significant because "Every historian of the drama knows that the Corpus Christi play grew out of the religious procession" (Stevens "Postscript" 114 italics mine); to ignore this relationship must have jarred the assumptions of a school of thought raised on

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Chambers, Young and Craig. Stevens' approach was built upon hypothesis; Dorrell's was based on records.

Nelson published again in 1972\(^5\), stating much more cautiously:

It may be doubted whether true-processional technique was ever extensively employed. Nevertheless, from York and other cities come records which point to something very much like true-processional productions.... Still, we may permit ourselves to search for possible alternatives which could account for the processional characteristics of certain extant plays, particularly the Corpus Christi plays. (124-125)

The remainder of this essay was a discussion of the use of *locus* and *platea* staging convention in the N-Town plays and bore little relation to the York controversy, other than to demonstrate that it caused the re-examination of the other plays, with the eventual result of an increased appreciation of York's unique, rather than exemplary nature.

The controversy attracted another voice in 1973 when James Hoy\(^6\) published a summary of his dissertation. Hoy proposed several alternatives for staging the cycle, although he conceded that the records evidence did not support any: he suggested that several days may have been taken for a processional performance at all stations; or that the plays may have been grouped and played continually at separate stations while the audience processed past each; or that the plays were presented in dumb show on the wagons and gathered for a final performance at one fixed location such as the Pavement. He concluded however, "despite the many advantages that a fixed staging in the Pavement would have had, the records preponderantly rule for processional staging with each play being presented at each station." (Hoy "Staging Time" 17) According to Hoy's calculation, this would have taken "from fifteen to almost twenty-four hours", and yet this extended play would have been thematically effective:


\(^6\) James F. Hoy *The Staging Time of the York Cycle of Corpus Christi Plays* Emporia State Research Studies 21:3 (Winter 1973)
Doomsday would have been extremely effective if performed at sunrise or with the red glow of the sunrise in the background. The cycle of God's world, from the dawn of Creation to the dawn of the day of Final Judgement; the cycle of the natural day, from sunrise to sunrise; and the cycle of plays, from the creation and fall of man to the dawn of his new salvation, would all have reached their culmination in the literal dawning of the new day - and in the figural dawning of the possibility of a new life. (Hoy "Staging Time" 18)

Hoy published again in 1973, pointing out that since the routes of the York Corpus Christi play and procession were quite distinct from one another, the play could not have evolved from the procession, and the procession would not have held up the play's performance. He went so far as to suggest that "the procession and the plays may even have been separate and distinct at their inceptions." (Hoy "Relationship" 168)

Alexandra Johnston published a further analysis of the records of the separation of play and procession after 1426. In 1426, Friar William Melton preached a sermon which urged that the play should be separated from the strictly religious procession; as a result, the people of York held a public meeting and decided that the play should be played on the day before the feast of Corpus Christi, and the procession proceed on the day itself. It had been assumed until this point that 1426 therefore marked the point at which the play and procession did in fact separate into events held upon successive days. Johnston challenged the long-held assumption that this decision actually represented the state of affairs from 1426 onward by demonstrating that despite the record of the Commons' decision, the surviving documents do not indicate any separation of events until at least 1468, when the Mayor paid for a sermon preached the day after Corpus Christi; the records for that year also show that the play was performed, as usual, on the day of Corpus Christi itself. From 1476 onward (the date from which the surviving House Books begin), it is clear that the procession took place on the day after the Feast of Corpus Christi, with the lone exception of 1481, when "perhaps... the Council tried to fulfill the motion passed by their predecessors fifty-five years


earlier." (Johnston "Procession" 59) This realization highlighted the fact that the City Council and the Commons in York did not always work in common; the Council controlled the plays, and despite the pious intent of the Commons, the Council retained the use of Corpus Christi day itself for the more commercially viable pageants. Johnston concluded:

To assume that after 1426 the York Corpus Christi play took place on a different day from the procession of Corpus Christi is clearly invalid. On the basis of the documentary evidence... it can be stated that until 1468 at the earliest the procession of Corpus Christi and the play of Corpus Christi were probably two separate events taking place in the city of York on the day of the feast. (Johnston "Procession" 59)

This conclusion affected Stevens' criticism of Dorrell's work; what she had proposed as a likely reconstruction until 1426 was now acceptable until at least 1468.

Stanley Kahrl's book19, which was in the publication process long before Johnston's 1973-74 article appeared, added another variation to the staging theory. This was a compromise between the 'true processional' and 'tableaux vivants' camps:

Suppose that the Corpus Christi procession began with every pageant wagon in order as we have them.... at five in the morning. Suppose that the procession advanced until 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. (Kahrl Traditions 45)

This state of affairs, he thought, would have been in effect until 1426, after which point, the plays would have been free to increase in size - longer plays, especially those of the York Realist, would thus have been developed after 1426.

Nelson's book, The Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays20, published in 1974, also exhibited the effects of having already gone to press while Johnston's and Dorrell's research articles were appearing. Nelson began with an attack upon Kolve's approach which criticized him for permitting "formal analysis of early vernacular drama [to

19Stanley Kahrl Traditions of Medieval English Drama (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1974)

take] precedence over an inquiry into historical fact", (Nelson Stage 8) and the hypothesis that:

fifteenth century English dramatic cycles developed out of fourteenth century festival processions. A corollary of this argument is that the doctrinal relationship of the Corpus Christi dramatic play to the feast of Corpus Christi is almost entirely incidental. (Nelson Stage 9)

This book was based upon Nelson's attack on the theory of 'true-processional' staging. His discussion of the concept was largely a recapitulation of his earlier article on the subject; in his chapter on York, the alternative understanding permitted by the dismissal of processional staging was more thoroughly developed. The first argument was based on the A/Y Memorandum book, in which the 1415 list first describes the pageants, and then lists the torches to be carried in the procession. Following Martin Stevens, who also read the order of the list as indicative of the order of events of the day, Nelson argued

If the guilds had presented dramatic pageants at each of twelve or more stations along the processional route, the chief citizens of York could not have begun their march until late in the day and would then have been forced to remain at the end of the march for some six hours while the pageants still performing ahead of them made their ponderous way through the city. (Nelson Stage 39)

The pageants described must then have been other than those contained in the text: short, static displays containing only fragments of dialogue.

A cycle of actions such as this, presented at many stations, may in some sense be regarded as true-processional drama. The "plays" must have been extremely brief, however, quite unlike the half-hour long plays in the Passion sequence of the extant York cycle manuscript. (Nelson Stage 40)

The necessary outcome of this argument was the proposal that the surviving text in the Register represents a second cycle which could only have been performed once at a single, stationary location.

We are forced to the conclusion therefore, that in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries York had two distinct Corpus Christi plays: the procession of pageants on the one hand; and the dramatic cycle on the other. The cycle must have been presented at a single site within the city after the conclusion of the pageant procession. (Nelson Stage 42)
The documents which refer to a 'play' then, must be read as referring to either one or the other of these events:

Though the play and procession are named separately in this proclamation, the play must be understood as the procession of pageants within the ecclesiastical procession. (Nelson Stage 43)

Nelson argued that the performance of the text containing the York cycle was stationary, as were those of the now-lost Creed and Pater Noster plays. After their accompanying processions, these performances were presented indoors, exclusively for the worthies of the town, in the chamber of the Common Hall gates (rather than upon the Pavement). Nelson based this hypothesis upon the logic that if the dramatic cycle came after the procession, it could not have begun until late morning or noon and must have lasted until near midnight; "the comfort of the mayor and aldermen would be better served where weather could be no concern and hunger could be relieved by a sumptuous feast even during the course of the play." (Nelson Stage 78) Even the mechanical difficulties raised by the introduction of an ass into the plays of Abraham and Isaac, The Flight into Egypt and The Entry into Jerusalem were insignificant:

It is not impossible that a real ass was brought indoors for the performance: an ass is a docile creature which might easily have been led in on these three occasions. On the other hand, it is conceivable that a fabricated beast was used in place of a real one. (Nelson Stage 79)

This indoor performance would have been the final product of a gradual evolution: "perhaps it was not until the 1450's or even the 1460's that the cycle as a whole was performed in the chamber." (Nelson Stage 77) The book went on to examine the other records of English religious drama, arguing in general that the processional staging model was incorrect, the mythical product of flawed earlier scholarship. Just as York had once served such historians as Chambers as an exemplary model of processional staging, so it once again became the key to the vision of medieval English drama as a whole. By attacking this idea, Nelson raised new questions concerning medieval audiences and the purposes of their drama. One of the eventual effects of Nelson's attempt to use the York records in order to attack the idea of processional staging was the growing perception that the case of York was unique rather than
exemplary and a resultant movement toward more specific studies of individual geographical areas and away from general studies of English medieval drama as a whole.

Nelson's analysis of the York documents was rebutted by Alexandra Johnston\textsuperscript{21} in her review of the volume. Of the A/Y Memorandum book, she said:

This argument, based on the order of entries in the Memorandum Book, is somewhat weakened, however, by the fact that the Proclamation of the play follows immediately after the torch list. The Proclamation bears the heading "Proclamacio ludi corporis cristi facienda in vigilia corporis cristi". This event then, the third in the order of the manuscript, was actually the first event of the Corpus Christi celebrations taking place the day before the play and procession. (Johnston "review of Nelson" 239)

Johnston pointed out a number of inaccuracies in Nelson's use of the records and provided charts of all the evidence of station lists and chamber rentals surviving from 1433 - 1561, much of which was unpublished at the time. The logic of placing an entire cycle's performance in the rented (and probably cramped) quarters recorded was questioned, "since the Mayor and Corporation had the use of the adjacent Common Hall free of charge." (Johnston "review of Nelson" 245) Finally, Johnston noted that Nelson had ignored the evidence concerning John Clerk, who was paid to monitor the plays of the Register at the first station:

It seems, from the amount of food, wine or wages provided, that the Common Clerk or his deputy spent the whole day at the gates of Holy Trinity, Micklelegate, acting as official monitor upon the text of a play that was being performed, Professor Nelson would have us believe, a brisk fifteen minute walk away across the river. (Johnston "review of Nelson" 247)

The documentary evidence, she concluded, "is simply not conclusive. The accountants of York were not concerned with transmitting information to posterity, but rather with balancing their books." (Johnston, "review of Nelson" 245)

This review was followed very soon by the publication of an edition of the *Ordo*

Paginarum gathering of the A/Y Memorandum Book\textsuperscript{22}, and a subsequent note\textsuperscript{23} correcting errors in Lucy Toulmin Smith's transcription of the Ordo Paginarum. Dorrell pointed out the fact that these misreadings had distorted attempts to compare the Ordo to the register: 

the corrected readings accord more closely with the registered pageants, and furthermore the additions to Burton's notes on the Carpenters' pageant allow speculation about the date of the revision of the Resurrection text and the compilation of the register of the York Corpus Christi Play. (Dorrell "Misreadings" 4)

In 1975, Johnston assembled and examined the records of the missing Creed and Pater Noster plays\textsuperscript{24}. In part, this article was published with the intention of defending the "true processional" production for each of these plays, which, as for the Corpus Christi play, "Miss Dorrell has clearly demonstrated.... was played at various stations throughout the city, each episode being mounted by a single guild or combination of guilds on a pageant wagon."\textsuperscript{25} (Johnston "Creed" 56) In the case of the Creed play, she quoted the reverse side of the 1449-51 account roll of the Corpus Christi guild, which stipulated the conditions of performance of this play, stating that it 

was to be played every ten years "in various places (in varijs locis) of the said city of York" to audiences gathered together in these places. The play was to be financed by "eisdem locis inhabitantes," the inhabitants at these places. Here is a strong indication that the Creed play, like the Corpus Christi play, was "true processional" in its performance. It is probable that the "various places" were the twelve familiar stations of the civic play. (Johnston "Creed" 60)

Providing a chart which tabulated the articles of the Creed with the iconographic scenes with

\textsuperscript{22}Martin Stevens and Margaret Dorrell "The Ordo Paginarum Gathering of the York A/Y Memorandum Book" Modern Philology 72 (August 1974) 45-59.

\textsuperscript{23}Margaret Dorrell "The Butchers' Saddlers' and Carpenters' Pageants: Misreadings of the York Ordo" English Language Notes 13:1 (September 1975) 1-4.


\textsuperscript{25}Johnston refers to Margaret Dorrell "Two Studies of the York Corpus Christi Play" Leeds Studies in English 6 (1972) 63-111, discussed above.
which they were traditionally associated, Johnston argued that the Creed play borrowed its wagons and most props from the civic guilds.

The treatment of the Pater Noster play reiterated the significant discovery that the chartulary and minute book of the York Mercers, which appeared to suggest that the Mercers were responsible for the Pater Noster play, turned out to contain nineteenth century over-writing. As a result, "any speculation... concerning the involvement of the Mercers in the Pater Noster play as producers is invalid." (Johnston "Creed" 70) As in the case of the Corpus Christi and Creed plays, Johnston argued for a public and processional performance.

this play, like the others, was a didactic tool..... To fulfill the original purpose of the play it would have to be played openly and publicly. Furthermore, the minutes of 1558 indicate that every effort was made to advertise the play by the crying of the banns.... Such advertising would hardly be done for a private performance. (Johnston "Creed" 73)

Johnston agreed with M.D. Anderson regarding the possible content of this play, who had suggested that each scene of the play was based upon one of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer and its corresponding deadly sin. The records of the demise of each play were carefully examined; she concluded

The Creed play and the Pater Noster play both were conceived as didactic instruments for the cure of souls. They began as the property of two religious guilds in York and ended as parts of the great dramatic trilogy... controlled by the municipality.... if the argument for "true processional" staging of these plays.... is accepted, then it is clear that the people of York were deeply committed to these plays, sharing in their production in a very real way. It was perhaps the involvement of the craft guilds which encouraged the city council to gradually assume more and more civic responsibility for these plays. (Johnston "Creed" 80)

The article contained transcriptions of all documents pertaining to both plays, some previously unpublished.

The Records of Early English Drama project at the University of Toronto was the ultimate result of the minute examination of original records documents caused by the

26The outlines of this scheme were drawn from M.D. Anderson Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches (Cambridge, 1963) 37-40.
staging controversy. The project published its first newsletter in 1976, announcing its formation, goals and methods. Alexandra Johnston was appointed Executive Editor, and with Margaret Dorrell Rogerson, co-editor of the two-volume York records. The purpose of the project was to make publicly available "primary research tools for the writing of histories of early theatre, music and public entertainments... still largely unlisted and uncollected... [or] edited, often inaccurately and selectively, ... scattered through many minor journals and records series. (Dutka "Introduction" 1) During the next three years, the project generated a number of articles about dramatic activities in York which were based upon the primary sources uncovered through the activity of collection.

In the first issue of the REED Newsletter, Johnston also published a previously unknown printed broadside from 1570 which described and defended the Yule riding at York. This ceremony, performed at winter solstice, featured two riders called Yule and Yule's wife and children crying after them. A 1572 letter by the Ecclesiastical Commission to the Council of the City of York, which called for the riding to be stopped, was explained as referring not to 'pagan' licentiousness, but to a survival of Catholicism.

In January 1976, Paula Lozar published a transcription and translation of the sermon "prologue" to the ordinances of the York Corpus Christi Guild because this text was not to be included in the REED York volume. Lozar argued that members of the trade guilds and of the Corpus Christi guild were essentially drawn from the same group of people, despite the fact that the Corpus Christi Guild was separate from the plays, and that the contents of the sermons might therefore be useful in understanding the plays. The sermon, like the


30 Lozar enigmatically noted "A.F. Johnston (Executive Editor, REED), personal communication." The Prologue was not included because the Guild of Corpus Christi was not involved in the production of the plays, and thus fell outside the guidelines restricting materials to those relating to dramatic production.
cycle, is historical in scope, but unlike the plays, it uses a verbal mode of logical analysis, rather than the more emotionally affective visual mode.

Johnston's work with the York records produced a careful redefinition of the roles of the Guild and Procession of Corpus Christi. First, "the Guild of Corpus Christi never at any time had anything to do with the Corpus Christi play. That great dramatic production was in the hands of the city council and the craft guilds." (Johnston "Guild and Procession" 373) The Guild, which was founded in 1408, was predated by the procession by at least twenty years (the procession is first mentioned in the York Memorandum Book, 8 May 1388). Regarding Nelson's and Stevens' assertion that the processionally-staged play was untenable if (because?) it had preceded the procession, she argued that "the sacrament was consecrated in the Priory of Holy Trinity and carried through the streets as the first event of the Corpus Christi celebrations and was followed by the play performed from the pageant wagons of the craft guilds." (Johnston "Guild and Procession" 377) Her conclusions were:

The procession of Corpus Christi in York was begun before the Guild of Corpus Christi was established and continued after it had been abolished. For the first half of the life of the Guild, from 1408-1477, the Guild gradually assumed a place of honour and prominence within the procession. This place it held for the second half of its life from 1477-1547. Yet at no time did it control the procession. Its participation was limited to honouring the sacrament and regulating its member priests within the procession. From first to last, it was the city council of York who ordered and controlled the procession as part of its lavish celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi. (Johnston "Guild and Procession" 384)

Johnston's work produced a growing sense of the structure of power relations in medieval York, a structure dominated by the city council, which was in turn predominantly composed of members of the Mercers' Guild.

Douglas Cowling wrote about the liturgical celebration of Corpus Christi. This was the Guild of Corpus Christi's responsibility and it was a civic and parochial event, separate

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from both the monastic and cathedral celebrations of the day, and from the pageant procession in which the plays were performed. During the period when this civic celebration occurred on the same day as the plays, they remained separate events with different schedules and routes. After sketching out the likely route and schedule of this procession, Cowling concluded:

We cannot over-emphasize the fact that the liturgical procession and the pageant procession were separate entities.... Both processions honoured Corpus Christi, but neither was dependant upon the other. (Cowling 8-9)

Margaret Rogerson (née Dorrell) provided external evidence for the dating of the Register, which placed its preparation at a later date than was previously believed. She speculated about a date "well into the last quarter of the fifteenth century" declaring "It is possible that the bulk of the Register had been completed by 1501." (Rogerson "Dating" 4)

Alexandra Johnston provided a bibliography for the Yule broadside, two new early references to plays in York (a 1370 Christmas interlude, and a 1376 will which mentioned playbooks), and references to performers hired by the Minster to help celebrate the feasts of St. William and Pentecost. Albert F. Chambers explored the relations of the vicars choral of the York Minster Cathedral, through their ownership of two tileries, with the performances of the Tilemakers. He found a complex and ever-changing pattern of relations in which the vicars choral were contributors, first on a very close basis, and then after 1422 when the play was combined with those of several other guilds, on a more formal basis. He also located a participant who may have linked both organizations: Robert Skrueton, a clerk and proctor who was also a tileseller and who performed the job of pageant-master in 1426-27.

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33Margaret Rogerson "External Evidence for Dating the York Register" REED Newsletter 1:2 (1976) 4-5.

Margaret Rogerson provided more details of the production's financing in 1978. She found that the guilds drew funds for their pageants from five possible sources: annual contributions from members, annual contributions from non-members who practised the craft (often significantly higher than for members), special payments by new members entering the guild or members taking the rank of master, a fraction of fines levied on infringements of craft ordinances, and fees from other guilds which did not own pageants. In all of these arrangements, she noted

the interest the City Council took in this practical matter of finance.... the civic administration exercised considerable control over the sources of pageant funds. All craft ordinances had to be ratified by the Mayor and Council. These ordinances included instructions for yearly payments to the pageant fund from members, for payments of money from fines and special payments for entry as master or full member of the craft. (Rogerson "Practical Considerations" 99)

Her study revealed a network "of amazing complexity" which was designed to keep the plays going on a very practical basis, and emphasized again, the City Council's control of their administration.

In 1978 Meg Twycross published an important study of the performance locations which added significantly to the information available in Anna J. Mill's 1951 article. The high point of the article was the chart which concluded it, in which Twycross placed the holder of each station for each known performance, more than 200 people over nearly 200 years. By locating the stations as specifically as possible, she drew a number of interesting conclusions: the stations earlier on the route were consistently more popular at first; later, those toward the end increased in popularity.

at the beginning of our period, people were more certain of getting their money's worth at the beginning of the route than at the end.... the Pavement was considered a bad investment because the time schedule for the playing of pageants could fall behind and, frequently 'lack of day' blacked out a fair


number of the pageants at the end of the sequence. (Twycross "Places" 18)

Secondly, she noted that all of the houses which could be identified were on the left-hand side of the road:

If audience scaffolds were on both sides of the road, to keep turning a heavy cart around 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. (Twycross "Places" 20)

Her work also pointed out many of the problems related to interpreting information in the records: rolls so faded that readings could only be obtained under ultraviolet light, permutations of spelling, untraceable names, householders who might have moved, separate individuals who had the same names at the same time, variations of method in recording the information. The task was obviously difficult, but its reward was in the "illusion of becoming part of a whole late-medieval urban community, closely related by ties of friendship, trade and bickering, motivated by piety and profit." (Twycross "Places" 14)

The REED York volumes appeared in 1979. They presented an impressively solid collection of evidence about dramatic activities in the city of York. Ecclesiastical dramatic activities, and those of the surrounding countryside were not included; they were to be later presented in a volume on Yorkshire. They did include records from the Guild of Corpus Christi, the Pater Noster guild, the Mercers' guild, other guilds involved in the Corpus Christi play, records of royal visits, occasional wills and court records mentioning players: a potpourri of original documentation accurately transcribed, dated according to modern practice and chronologically organized, along with translations of all non-English documents, glossaries, subject and place & name indexes, and an introduction which briefly sketched out York's role in national events, the organization of its civic government and of its craft and religious guilds. The most obvious thing which the volumes did not include, however, was any interpretation of, or commentary on the records; an editorial history of

37Alexandra Johnston and Margaret Rogerson eds. Records of Early English Drama: York (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979)
drama in York. The editors wished to present the documents neutrally in order to make a long-standing contribution to scholarship, rather than one marked by the controversies of a particular period. The Introduction stated:

No attempt has been made to interpret the documents. We have published elsewhere detailed arguments of our conclusions about the York cycle, the procession of Corpus Christi and the Creed and Pater Noster plays. Our concern here is to provide sufficient historical and bibliographical context to allow others to understand and interpret material which can be, in itself, laconic and ambiguous. These documents are not a history of drama, minstrelsy and ceremonial as such; they are memoranda, minutes of council meetings, accounts, letters, wills, ordinances, and legal contracts which touch upon and illumine practices of long-standing custom and ceremony. (Johnston and Rogerson REED: York ix)

The REED project began in York, in the controversy surrounding processional staging, but it was vastly more ambitious in scope: it proposed to collect all the dramatic records for all the counties in England. Thus the decision to withhold commentary was directly linked to the idea that it would be more appropriate to write such a commentary from the perspective that the completed collection would provide. The York records, having finally been thoroughly explored, transcribed, researched and organized, presented a paradox: rather than making the past more knowable, they made it less definite. "Although they are voluminous, they are also fragmentary, presenting some practices in tedious repetition while mentioning others only once, leaving room for speculation." (Johnston and Rogerson REED: York xv) Errata discovered post-publication were printed in 1980. Name-spelling presented a great challenge, and provoked a rethinking of policy:

REED... tries to determine forms from examples in the same entry wherever possible.... we should never again print in the text a reading we are unsure of but, instead, make suggestions in the footnotes and end-notes.... providing end-notes and index entries of correct variant spellings of the same name. (Johnston "Errata" 38)

REED's work and the use of records was discussed at a Colloquium held in the fall

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38 personal communication with Alexandra Johnston, who supervised this dissertation.

of 1978 at the University of Toronto. Peter Meredith discussed the Ordo and the Mercers' Indenture. He emphasized that the Ordo was the document from which the billets were annually issued and that its many corrections and rewritings indicated a desire on the part of the civic authorities to keep it current. Meredith reworked some of the knottier mechanical problems of the Mercers' Indenture, suggesting that it described a "wagon with a box-frame superstructure surmounted by an iron-frame heaven containing a 'wheel' to carry the ropes which raise God to the roof of the pageant" (Meredith "Item" 48). He concluded "I have become more and more convinced of the need for reliable editions, not only of that material which has not yet been published but also of much of that which has, so that the painstaking interpretation which I spoke of at the beginning can be undertaken with confidence in rather than suspicion of the texts from which one is working." (Meredith "Item" 50)

Martin Stevens provided an initial analysis of the REED York volumes in which he experimented with

the kinds of questions that can now be answered confidently, thoroughly and efficiently through the apparatus and the rest of the York records... [and] the implications that can be drawn from the reading of dramatic records, both for what they tell us of the cultural milieu that they chronicle and for what they signify to the literary critic. (Stevens "Initial" 160)

By examining the series of events clustered around the annual performance which the documents recorded for the years 1550-1600, Stevens' application revealed that "the order and responsibility for plays differed widely from year to year and the notion that the register was identical to the performance is one that we must permanently discard." (Stevens "Initial" 165) He critiqued the exclusion of the record of the collapse of the Ouse Bridge in 1565,


which explained the lack of performances in 1565 and 1566:

the play could not have been played even with the best of will.... they are, of course, not dramatic records as such, but it might be wise for future editors to consider such central, related entries in future volumes.... (Stevens "Initial" 171)

His reading of the records led to further conclusions on the demise of the plays:

the death of the religious festival plays was far less concerned with religious and political doctrine than it was with the spirit of play. Puritanism killed the religious festival drama.... The cross-currents of wish and act are clearly discernible in the dramatic records; authorities could kill the performances, but not the memory or the spirit of *ludus*. (Stevens "Initial" 172, 173)

Stevens reconciled the facts that the performance changed every year, and that the Register text was not an accurate record of any specific text by reading the extant text as the still point from which the annual performances emanated:

The dramatic records have provided us with a new and fuller understanding of the flux of performance at York. That allows us the luxury of seeing the text for the first time as a stable source.... to appreciate the dynamics of performance within the context of the immutable literary text. (Stevens "Initial" 177)

Stevens' 'stilling' of the text seems to me to be incompatible with his mention "that this text is the product of possibly several compilers and revisers." (Stevens "Initial" 176) The problem of how and whether to read the text as literature within its complex historical, social and doctrinal context has become one of the most pressing themes in recent scholarship.

REED's research led to an increasing awareness that full publication of the records could potentially change the known history of English drama in profound ways; in the knowledge, for example, that cyclical Corpus Christi productions like the York plays were atypical rather than typical of medieval English dramatic form: John Wasson⁴ said these cycles are aberrations from the norm; the standard Corpus Christi play was a single play requiring no very great expense or preparation and of no exceptional length.... yet not one of the texts has come down to us. We do

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not... even have a description of one to give us an idea of their subject matter. (Wasson "Where they are" 139)

John Astington looked forward to the project's completion: "we will each be able to test for ourselves assertions or theories based on this or other kinds of evidence, assertions that in the past have sometimes depended on a deliberately selective or misrepresented use of sources." (Astonic "Comment" 93)

Peter Meredith published an article in 1980 which continued Albert Chambers' work on the Tilemakers' pageant.44 The Ordo, he argued, was a much more complicated document than is normally indicated by those who had dealt with it. The 1415 list contained alterations, not only to the names of the crafts (as Lucy Toulmin Smith's edition had indicated) but also to the pageant descriptions (and therefore didn't necessarily represent the state of affairs in 1415). The Tilemakers' pageant, which M.G. Frampton had believed to be the product of a group which split and then reformed, was actually the production of a group whose membership shifted over the years. Turning to the recently published REED volumes, he looked to the indefinite future for definitive understanding:

it has provided in the main body of the text the material for a far richer investigation.... When those investigations have been made and the results published, we shall have a far better idea of the functioning of the Corpus Christi play in York and a far better idea too of the complex interrelationships between guild and guild, and guild and city. Only then will we have the basic information necessary for re-examining the development of the text of the cycle and the organization of its performance. (Meredith "Tilemakers" 70)

Eileen White45 published a short article in 1982 about the mayor's party in the Common Hall, which again demonstrated "that plays in York did indeed take place in the streets" (White 21) by tracking the legal documents associated with the houses in which the mayor and his party watched the plays, and in particular, by noting the presence of a fine set of removable glass windows in the upper chamber on the south side of the Common Hall.


gates. The same issue of the journal also included a note by Alexandra Johnston which related the discovery of documentary evidence of pageant wagon storage in the bishop's palace c. 1388; she cautioned that

the fact that the Bishop's agents let accommodations to guilds is, perhaps, an indication that, had the financial records of the other religious establishments in York survived, we would be able to account for all the wagons needed to perform the York cycle in procession. The survival of evidence is frequently a matter of chance. To build theories on the absence of evidence is to build on unsure foundations indeed. (Johnston "Pageant House" 25)

The reception of the REED project by the scholarly community was unanimously enthusiastic. Barrie Dobson's 1982 review in Renaissance and Reformation included the


47The following is a list of the reviews the York REED volumes received. All were positive. I am grateful for the opportunity to have consulted the complete collection of these reviews which is housed in the REED office.

anon. Manuscripta XXIII, 2 (July 1979) 125-184.
anon. The Year's Work in English Studies 60 (1979) 99-100.
Cameron, Angus Quill & Quire (May 1979) 44
Davidson, Clifford Comparative Drama 14 (1980) 79-81.
Fry, Donald K. Library Journal (July 1979) 287.
Gauvin, C. Etudes Anglaises 34:2 (1981) 210-211.
Scattergood, V.J. British Book News (November 1979) 949.
most thorough check of the volumes' accuracy. He said:

The writing of the history of the late medieval and early modern drama in York, and accordingly in England, will never be quite the same again.... How far the famous but often laconic references to the Corpus Christi procession and plays in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries may conceal a positive transformation of the playtexts and their staging remains a much more formidable problem; and it would be idle to pretend that these two volumes have foreclosed on the possibility of such speculative theories as those recently put forward by Professors Martin Stevens and Alan Nelson. Nevertheless the case for revising the traditional hypothesis of a "true-processional" playing of the Corpus Christi cycle receives no positive support from the documents here. (Dobson "rev. REED York" 48, 53)

Dobson pointed out the errors that did exist, but his opinion of the work was still decidedly positive. All of the reviews were laudatory, many highly so. Many commented upon the absence of interpretation; some explained this absence as necessary until all the data has been collected (see Davidson), some as merely allowing the data to speak for itself (see Shand and Palmer). Many reviewers noted the useful side avenues which were opened by making these records accessible, such as the study of linguistic and political changes, early professional travelling players, pageantry, law, wills, and guilds (see esp. Litt). Many scholars expressed their awareness of the gaps in the records, of the fact that they are not complete and could not completely express historical truth. Many also appreciated the fascinating richness of details available (see Shand). The initial critical response to the refusal of the editors to write a history of drama in York was perhaps best represented by Clifford Davidson's comment:

When all the facts from everywhere are in- i.e. when the entire corpus of dramatic records of early drama is made available to us in the future - the time will be ripe for a history of medieval drama in England. Such a history will of course, need to take into account much in addition to the dramatic records and the play texts. For example, the evidence from the visual arts will need to be systematically examined and the entire civic and religious milieu will require careful assessment. As a final word of caution, such a history cannot and should not be attempted now but must wait for the careful accumulation of records and other evidence to provide a satisfactory view of theatrical experience in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance periods. (Davidson "rev. REED York" 81)

The REED York volume thus caused a major change in the way the medieval drama was
addressed: the movement was now toward greater and more detailed knowledge of specific times and places, and away from any attempt to synthesize an overview of the area.

The only serious critique of the REED project to appear was that of Teresa Coletti\(^4\) in 1990. Although it falls chronologically beyond the time-frame of this thesis, it must be addressed because it raised fundamental questions about the critical foundation of the enterprise. Coletti charged that the REED project was flawed because it rested on the unexamined assumption that its activity would eventually lead to an objectively real and permanent version of 'truth', rather than acknowledging its own historicity. Facts, she said, "are not simply 'out there' but rather are constructed by the historical inquiry itself" (Coletti "Reading REED" 250); therefore

REED needs to acknowledge that its editorial policies and procedures have profound implications both for its own historical scholarship and for the literary history to which it hopes to contribute. Like all acts of historical understanding, REED's mandate to select and excerpt certain kinds of records of early drama from the documents in which they occur constitutes an interpretive intervention of a high order: what this activity offers as the representation of fact is already an explanation of historical structures based on the editorial and selection processes themselves. (Coletti 270)

This process of lifting the records out of their documentary context resulted in what Coletti called a 'decontextualizing' of the past "because they offer it in a form which sets aside crucial questions about the documents' sociohistorical motivations, their place in a structure of communication, and their writers' relation to those in power." (Coletti 271) This meaningless accumulation of decontextualized fact was to blame for what Coletti identified as "a methodological vacuum... our inability to formulate meaningful questions" (Coletti 252). The context which she sought and did not find in the REED volumes was social and religious, one in which drama "was deeply woven into the fabric of an everyday life that was regulated by visual and public ceremony expressive of an ideal cultural and social organization." Because the Reformation destroyed nearly all the religious records, the records themselves were biased; "REED itself reproduces the records' unwitting bias in its

general reluctance to embrace the centrality of religion and myth" (Coletti 273).

Despite the fact that Coletti's article featured a number of low-handed assaults on the REED project, I believe that the above points are worth consideration. The activities of the original antiquarians - Sharp, Halliwell-Phillips, Furnivall, Chambers - provided the limited facts upon which the very flawed vision of the York cycle's literary evolution rested for decades, until the texts and records were re-examined. The reticence of the REED editors to produce a 'definitive' history of drama in England before 'all the facts are in' rested upon their awareness of the fragmentary nature of the records which have survived the centuries and the dangers of building complete visions based on such partial foundations. REED produced nothing more definitive than a selective reproduction; the criterion of selection was reference to dramatic and performance-related activity; the assumption behind that criterion was that there are students who will seek historical data specifically regarding dramatic and performance-related activity. If the study of historical drama and performance-related activity should cease or become subsumed into the study of historical social conditions, then that criterion will no longer be useful. In the meanwhile, students often continue to approach the York plays via their English and Drama departments, and the materials published by the REED project continue to provide a way into an understanding of their social and civic context. Coletti's critique called for a REED which is

not...a prolegomenon to some future history but as a literary historical act in its own right, part of a historiography which issues in no final object but rather provides only interim reports. (Coletti "Reading REED" 284)

This is factually the case in 1996. No one is more aware of the impossibility of definitiveness than a REED editor; the very fact that after twenty years none of them have yet produced the 'definitive history' suggests that Coletti's fears were based on the dubious evidence of fundraising brochures and outdated grant proposals. REED resides within a community of scholarship in which the vision of the past is subject to constant re-envisioning by a multivalent and perpetually changing present.

Coletti was called upon in 1991 to review the Herefordshire/ Worcestershire REED

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49Many of Coletti's assertions were based upon information loosely drawn from publicity materials designed for fundraising; not all sources were even noted.
volume, and her comments in that review\textsuperscript{50} revealed both a softening of her own stance and an adjustment of REED's editorial practices toward greater inclusiveness. As in her previous article, she accused REED of the contextual reconfiguration of historical evidence:

...they are not only dependant upon the fragmentary textual and material traces which... make up the constructed category of historical "evidence"... but they also enact a deliberate and systematic creation of their own metafragments as they excise references to dramatic activity from their host documents and reconfigure them according to the principles established by the series. (Coletti "Fragmentation" 3)

However, the combative sense that REED represented an Anglo-Canadian branch of scholarship opposed to "theory" had softened into a recognition of REED's role in theoretical debates:

One felicitous, if inadvertant development of this pursuit, has been the emergence, from information REED has brought to light, of a picture of English "drama" fully compatible with the insights of cultural studies.... I find it encouraging (if also a little ironic, given REED's stated policy of refraining from interpretation and theorizing in any form) to think of REED as contributing to the reassessment of cultural and textual practice which is a principle consequence of post-modern theory. (Coletti "Fragmentation" 10)

Peter Greenfield's response\textsuperscript{51} argued that the dream of 'completeness' to which Coletti objected was in fact "only a dream of completion, completion of an editorial project ambitious but realistic in scope." (Greenfield 15) and emphasized the usefulness of the records in New Historicist understandings of the role of theatrical presentations in the social topography. In the case of Corpus Christi plays such as that of York,

The Corpus Christi and Midsummer processions involved the citizenry in public rituals that celebrated community while at the same time imaging status and authority.... the pageants [were] the city's representation of its communal self. (Greenfield 18)

The REED project, by "offering accurate transcriptions, selected and presented with a


minimum of interpretation, has produced a series versatile enough to provide material for our stories despite changes in critical fashion." (Greenfield 21) Thus the REED project, which began in the controversy over the York records, has survived and responded to the controversies generated by post-modernism.
Conclusions

This thesis has explored the past in a very REED-like manner: based on the criterion of relation to the York plays, I have read and selected representative critical quotations, presenting them neutrally and in rough chronological order. The story which my selections tell is as follows:

Late in the eighteenth century the classical ideals of the Enlightenment gave way to an interest in the qualities of the middle ages which were then perceived as everything that the 'civilization' of the day was not: spiritual, unsophisticated, rude, emotional, primitive, superstitious and inartificial. This interest continued and was redefined into two political streams during the nineteenth century: one sought the evidence of Aryan beginnings in folk custom and language; the other tried to correct the social abuses of the time by means of the example of the past. The medieval English plays thus emerged into a context of interest which addressed them in either, or a combination of these ways. The York plays were not published until forty years after the interest in medieval drama had been sparked; although Lucy Toulmin Smith was herself a social historian, philologically-based textual approaches were in the ascendancy at the end of the nineteenth century and the York plays were first studied for their words and then for their relations to the better-known Towneley plays. The evolutionary metaphor which shaped literary discourse and the studies of the York plays during the early twentieth century became the favored approach of American academics who developed an increasingly precise and scientized methodology. During this period, certain episodes of the medieval plays began to be performed. Eventually, increased precision in the application of the evolutionary approach revealed inexplicable anomalies and the paradigm began to break down. Father Gardiner's work, the collapse of social Darwinism in the aftermath of World War II, and the immensely successful performances of the cycle for the York Festival in 1951 caused the plays to be re-evaluated and the approaches gradually became more social and less textual. The York plays came to be appreciated as theatre, and as the historical evidence of a social practice. This new focus on drama was explored in studies which re-imagined how they must have looked and sounded and functioned; this interest led to interdisciplinary research in social and art history, to the
staging controversy of the 1970s, and to the use of academically-inspired attempts at period performance as a research tool. The staging controversy caused an intense re-examination of the records and text, which in turn highlighted the need for the publications of the records, of Beadle's new edition of the text, and of the facsimile of the manuscript. Exquisitely thorough attention to the text and records of the York Corpus Christi play has demonstrated the fragmentary and incomplete nature of our knowledge of the past; very little can be said with certainty about the York plays. What we 'know' now with any certainty is less than what was certain for such scholars as Hardin Craig, far less than what Chambers knew.

But what of the text of the Corpus Christi plays at York, which has provoked so much scholarly discussion during the past century? Mirror-like, it has generated readings which reflected the cultures of their authors. Much of its attraction has been based, as Coletti would say, upon 'the dream of wholeness'. In both its subject matter and the circumstances of its lone, official text, and of its well-documented production as the largest festival of the second-largest city in late-medieval England, the York cycle offered a paradigmatic vision of a compact and complete unit. But the result of careful re-examination of the text and records of the cycle has been an increasing awareness of the fragmentary and incomplete nature of what survives. In like manner, modern performances have demonstrated not only the timeless performability of the plays, but also the impossibility of reproducing an accurate representation of the dynamics and circumstances of their original productions. The 'dream of wholeness' has receded before a sea of details.

Can the play contained in the York Register be defined as literature, beyond its role as an indicator of social hierarchies and a record of defunct ritual practice? In order to address this question, it is necessary to provide a definition of literature. Trevor Ross, in The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory, pointed out that literature evolves as criticism evolves, and each critical school, as it defines its practice, recreates literature in its own image. (Ross 583)

Many of the critical schools which Ross summarized "assume a normative shift from

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invention to reading" which is problematic in the case of the York play, because its original audience did not read, but saw and heard it in performance. Although "arguments on behalf of a fictive concept of literature have the virtue of claiming as literature a variety of cultures and classes... they inevitably exclude didactic works" (Ross 584); here again the didactic elements in the York cycle elude this definition as literature. Verbal concepts of literature which search for "the peculiarly refined or figurative quality of literary language" are somewhat more promising; pragmatic categorizations which define literature as that which is received as literature, and the "Marxists, literary sociologists and cultural materialists" who define as literature "everything that is taught in departments of literature or criticized by literary critics" and therefore contingent upon "the way that teachers and literary critics perceive the social purpose of their work" (Ross 585) offer definitions of literature wide enough to encompass the York plays, though unspecific as to how such literature might be approached. Literary approaches to the York plays are peculiarly difficult because of the circumstances of the writing of the text, and must assume a definition of literature which does not insist upon a single author or a fictional or an individually-consumed printed text, but which seeks the "literary" qualities of the language of a text taught within an academic setting. The performative quality of the York cycle text has only recently become assimilated into textual approaches.

Since Richard Collier's poorly-received 1978 study, textual approaches have not been popular. Alexandra Johnston53 argued in 1993 for a verbal literary approach to the York plays, based on the Augustinian definition of Christ as Word:

The preoccupation of the York Cycle with the logos is central to the didactic purpose of the cycle. Basic to the poetics of the cycle (i.e. the "textual dimensions of language"), however, is a dramaturgical principle shared by all medieval drama that can be traced in large measure to Augustine's sign theory. (Johnston "Word Made Flesh" 232)

Through its use of music, ritual poetic passages and their parodies, noise and silence, and

characterization and emotional effects built into its stanzaic patterns, the York cycle demonstrated

a guiding intelligence over the course of several generations of revisions that was influenced not just by the theology of Augustine but by his theories about language. (Johnston "Word Made Flesh" 246)

Johnston's reading was sensitive to the fact of performance; the text was built for actors who "need only speak the lines as they are written and the prosody establishes their characters." (Johnston "Word Made Flesh" 241) This sensitivity to performance dynamics is essential in any critical reading, literary or otherwise, of the York Play.

We can say then, in response to the question posed above, that the text can be read as literature, but as dramatic literature, as a text composed of words and influenced by the patristic tradition, which was spoken in performance by actors who were sponsored by, or members of the various guilds of York, exploring and defining their assorted positions and relations in both the human and divine hierarchies. Richard Beadle suggested in 1994 that

All the evidence of diverse scholarship and rolling revision of the cycle through the years nevertheless fails to displace the powerful submerged consistency of intent that informs the writing at every point. (Beadle Cambridge Companion 89)

and noted again the interplay of text and performance of which the critic of the York cycle must be aware:

the audience was in the best position to respond to the subtle patterns of emotional and conceptual interplay set up in the dramatic structures of the cycle.... they were connoisseurs of the remarkable metrical intricacy displayed in many of the plays.... Most of the York cycle still awaits detailed study along lines that move towards an integration of the textual, documentary and theatrical evidence, complex and resistant to consensual interpretation though some of it is. (Beadle Cambridge Companion 100)

The plays of the York cycle contain an astonishing range of complex stanzaic patterns; these contain bits of sermons, laments, apparently natural characterizations, iconographically perfect 'snapshot' moments, local jokes and references, earthy humour, and 'realistic' and (still) profoundly disturbing torture scenes. It is difficult to describe their

variety without writing 'advertising copy'. One of the great paradoxes in the study of this verbal complexity is that although the text is invariably modernized for production, the resultant staging often clarifies the purpose of the stanzaic pattern of the text; even the shadow of itself which can be made into an entertainment comprehensible to a modern academic audience sheds light on the great original. Despite this difficulty in apprehending the past, scholarship based on performance provides a rich vehicle by means of which the dynamics of discoveries of records research and studies in cultural materialism may be explored and made accessible. An historically self-aware approach which integrates these tools cannot but demonstrate the fascinating complexity of this great work of medieval art.
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