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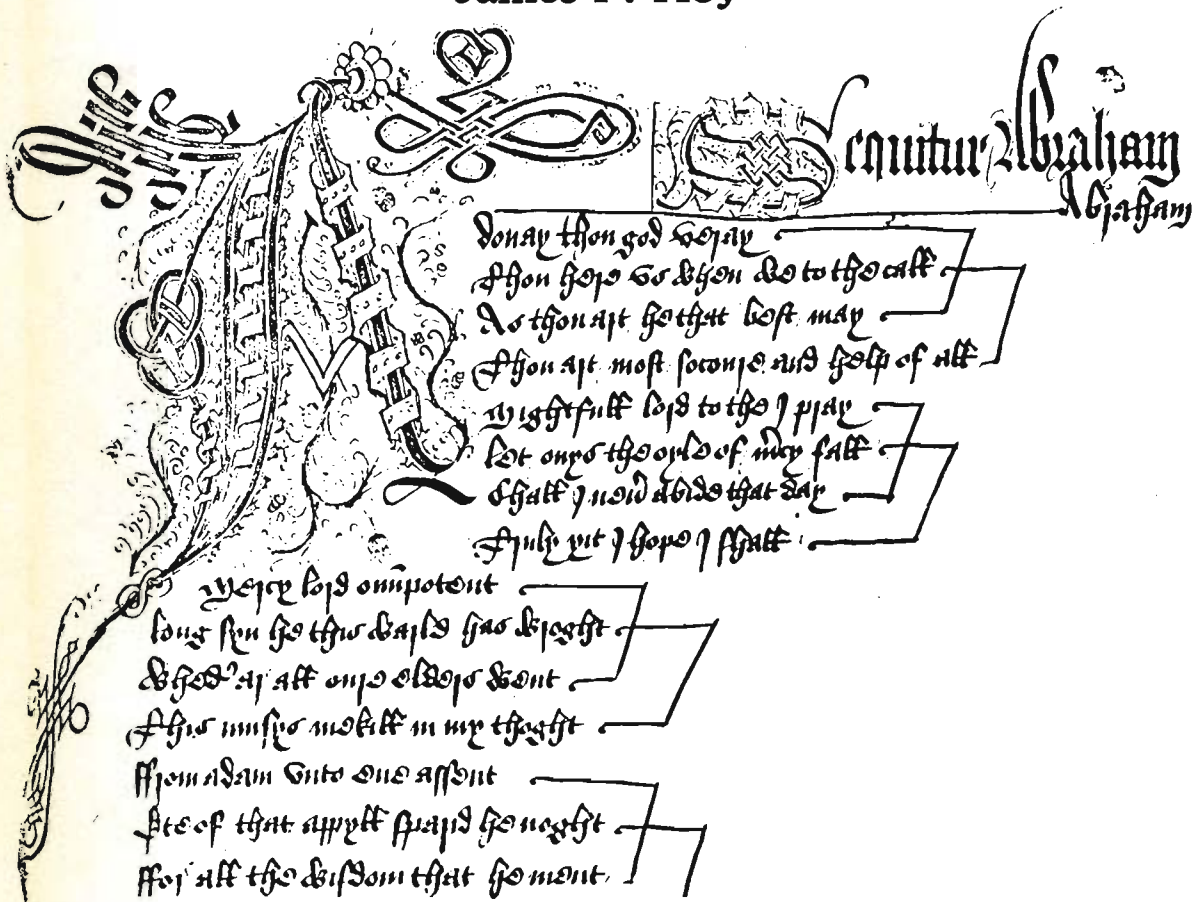
STUDIES

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The Staging Time of the York Cycle of Corpus Christi Plays

by

James F. Hoy



Donay thou god we pray
Thou hope so & thou do to the call
As thou art he that best may
Thou art most socour and help of all
Wightfull lord to the I pray
Let on to the oyle of my fall
Thou shalt I now abide that day
Thou shalt I hope I shall

We pray lord omnipotent
long for to the dayd has & right
As god at all on o elders went
Thou unse mekitt in my the right
From adam onto one assent
The of that appelt prayd he neight
For all the wisdom that he ment

sequitur Abraham
Abraham

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FOREWORD

The general conclusions of this study were first reached in the spring of 1967 in a graduate paper at the University of Missouri, Columbia, a paper that was later expanded to form part of my 1970 doctoral dissertation. The present form of the study was reached, however, when it was prepared for a KSTC Faculty Seminar in early 1971.

In many ways, I had, unknowingly, been working concurrently the same scholarly ground as Professor Alan H. Nelson ("Principles of Processional Staging: York Cycle," *MP*, LXVII (1970), 303-20). I have, nevertheless, decided to publish my study, not as a refutation to Prof. Nelson's hypothesis, which I find very compelling, but simply as an alternative theory, another point of view, to a very perplexing problem — the staging of medieval cycle drama. For that reason, as well as for the fact that I am currently working on a synthesis of his views and mine, I felt that it would not be untoward to offer my work in its original form. After all, as the minutes of the 1969 meeting of the MLA Conference on Medieval Drama point up (*Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, XIII-XIV (1970-71), pp. 204 ff), the area of medieval staging needs a great deal of scholarly attention. The present paper, therefore, purports to comprise a small part of that much needed scholarship.

I would like to acknowledge my debt to three of my professors at the University of Missouri — George B. Pace, Claudia Kren, and Milton McC. Gatch — for their tutorial guidance in the early stages of this study, and to Prof. Charles E. Walton of KSTC for his editorial assistance.

Emporia, Kansas
March, 1973

J. F. H.

The Staging Time of the York Cycle of Corpus Christi Plays

by

James F. Hoy *

Almost unanimously and without question, scholars agree that the York cycle of Corpus Christi plays was performed in a single day, hectic and long though that day must have been. Lucy Toumlin Smith set the pattern for this traditional belief, supported thereafter by Sir E. K. Chambers, Hardin Craig, and, more recently, V. A. Kolve, all of whom have argued with varying degrees of emphasis that a complete cycle performance would have been possible within a single day.¹ In fact, the two scholars most intimately associated with the modern revival of the York plays — the late J. S. Purvis, translator, and E. Martin Browne, producer — both believed that these plays were staged within a single day. Canon Purvis, however, did admit that some form of artificial lighting might have been necessary, but only for the final play in the cycle.² Browne thought that the medieval actors at York “. . . performed the almost incredible feat of playing their forty-eight (or, at one time, even fifty-seven) one-act plays between 4:30 a.m. and dusk on a single day in late May or early June.”³ By their silences, others have implied a belief in the traditional scholarly concept of a single-day performance.⁴ Indeed, the author of a recent study of the York pageant wagon, excellent for its consideration of practical and physical staging limitations, has silently assented to this notion.⁵ Moreover, Glynne Wickham, suprisingly enough, despite his bias toward

* Dr. Hoy is an Assistant Professor of English at Kansas State Teachers College.

¹ Smith (ed.), *York Plays*, p. xxxii. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, II, 138. Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages*, p. 203. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 233.

² *From Minister to Market Place*, p. 60. In a conversation in 1967, Canon Purvis told me that he definitely thought that the York plays originally were performed in a single day, while maintaining the apparently contradictory view that any attempt to stage a revival of the complete cycle, processionally, would result in a performance too long to be practical.

³ “Producing the Mystery Plays for Modern Audiences,” *Drama Survey*, III (1963), 7. Since Browne is an eminently qualified expert in the staging of medieval drama for modern audiences, most notably as the producer of the York cycle revived in 1951 and since staged every three years, one might expect him to be somewhat more cautious in accepting such an “incredible feat” without further effort to demonstrate its feasibility.

⁴ Cf. Martin Stevens, “The Staging of the Wakefield Plays,” *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, XI (1968), 115-128, and Arnold Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*.

⁵ M. James Young, “The York Pageant Wagon,” *Speech Monographs*, XXXIV (1967), 1-20.

practical stagecraft, apparently has not considered the staging-time of these plays.⁶ The fact is that, if the York plays were performed all in the course of Corpus Christi Day, the time required for their presentation would have been much longer than has been previously assumed. Although this difficulty was noted as early as 1843,⁷ it has not since been investigated, even perfunctorily, until quite recently when Martial Rose, in attempting to ascertain the approximate time that would have elapsed in the total staging and in the traveling between playing areas, estimated that the entire cycle in performance would have taken fifteen hours and that the last play would have been completed at the last station shortly after midnight.⁸ Nevertheless, Rose has termed his own estimates "impracticably conservative," and the author of this present study supports the validity of Rose's judgment, for the actual time required for the performance of the entire cycle at every station would have been even greater than that which Rose estimated. Obviously, the view of a single-day performance time merits objective reappraisal.

A comparison of the York staging with that of the other extant Corpus Christi plays serves to bring into sharp focus the problem at York. The Chester plays, for example, contain 11,156 lines distributed, at the most, among twenty-five separate plays. Although this cycle was enacted at only four different stations, three days immediately following Whitsunday were, nevertheless, allotted to the complete performance — *e. g.*, nine plays on Monday, nine on Tuesday, and seven on Wednesday.⁹ At Coventry, there were probably ten rather lengthy plays (the two surviving plays are 900 and 1,192 lines in length) performed at between three and ten stations, presumably all in one day.¹⁰ But Craig, who accepts the theory of a single-day York performance,

⁶ *Early English Stages, 1300 to 1600*, I (1300 to 1576). Wickham discusses the advantages of perambulatory staging, pp. 168-169, but mentions no possible disadvantages. On pp. 172-175, he asserts that one can now visualize the play in performance, but the "visualization" is that of a static scene — no mention is made of the passage of time or the problems of moving.

⁷ Robert Davies, *Extracts from the Municipal Records of the City of York*, p. 236. Davies thinks the number of plays extraordinary and suggests that, perhaps, some if not all were presented in the manner of a dumb show. He was, of course, writing before the discovery of the manuscript of the York plays. Modern scholarship, regrettably, tends to adopt patronizing attitudes towards earlier scholars whose views (and information) have since been superseded. Yet one should be alert to the critical insights offered by early scholars like Davies, who, when he asserts that the day of the Corpus Christi festival from morning to evening was not long enough for the presentation of the complete cycle, is undoubtedly correct.

⁸ *The Wakefield Mystery Plays*, pp. 23-24. Rose has noted that the length of the average play in the York cycle is 273 lines and that a play of this length would require approximately fifteen minutes to perform. He allows five minutes to travel between stations and five minutes to prepare the pageant for playing and for traveling.

⁹ S. F. Crocker, "The Production of the Chester Plays," *West Virginia University Studies: Philological Papers*, I (1936), 65.

¹⁰ Craig, pp. 284-294.

maintains that the playing of ten dramas at Coventry at ten stations all in a single day would have taken entirely too much time to be considered practically possible.¹¹ Some critics regard the 11,078 lines and forty-two plays of the Hegge cycle as a thematically unified cycle.¹² The best evidence, however, suggests that the plays as found in the surviving manuscript actually break down into three separate and distinct groups, each requiring quite different staging techniques, for while some of the Hegge plays may have been processional in nature, most of them call for staging in a fixed location.¹³ There is, also, strong internal evidence to indicate that only a part of the cycle was staged during any one given year.¹⁴ Thus, it is unlikely that the entire Hegge cycle was ever performed in a single day, if, indeed, it was ever performed in its entirety in any one year.

Concerning the Wakefield cycle, Rose has hypothesized that its thirty-two plays, comprising 12,226 lines, were produced over a period of three days and utilized a fixed rather than a processional method of staging.¹⁵ Although a procession and a dumb show may have preceded the production, the plays themselves would have been performed in a single location with the pageant wagons drawn into a sort of round, thus forming a multiple stage. Probably twelve plays were given on the first day, thirteen on the second, and the remainder of the cycle on the final day. Even if the theory of a three-day performance is invalid and even if the Wakefield cycle were actually performed on a single day, the latest evidence still supports the theory of a single performance staged in one location with the production ending well before dark.¹⁶

In contrast to the other Corpus Christi cycles, however, York has the longest extant text: 13,121 lines. This manuscript contains the greatest number of plays: forty-eight surviving (at one time at least fifty-seven). The documentary record shows that the cycle was apparently staged processionally at the greatest number of stations: from ten to sixteen. Moreover, all of this activity is believed to have taken place entirely in one day. Furthermore, the Corpus Christi procession at York, in which the consecrated host was carried about the town with great ceremony undoubtedly requiring a considerable amount of time, seemingly occurred on the same day as the plays as late as 1426. Although it is possible, of course, that the York plays *were* performed all in one day, one should first reexamine this concept and consider some possible alternative stagings before acceding to the traditional view.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

¹² Timothy Fry, "The Unity of the *Ludus Coventriae*," *SP*, XLVIII (1951), 527-570.

¹³ Kenneth Cameron and Stanley J. Kahrl, "Staging the N-Town Cycle," *Theatre Notebook*, XXI (1967), 135.

¹⁴ Craig, p. 251.

¹⁵ P. 30.

¹⁶ Stevens, p. 121.

Two major considerations must be dealt with in order to determine the approximate playing time of this cycle: *i. e.*, the route and its stations, and the playing times of the individual plays. As previously noted, the playing stations ranged in number from ten to sixteen. Since the average number of stations specified in surviving lists is just over twelve, for the purposes of this study, the following list has been used, because it is not only the earliest extant list (*c.* 1399) but also the one most typical in every respect:¹⁷

1. Gates of Holy Trinity in Mikelgate,
2. Door of Robert Harpham,
3. Door of John de Gyseburne,
4. Skeldergatehend and Northstreetend,
5. End of Coneystreet towards Castlegate,
6. End of Jubirgate,
7. Door of Henry Wyman in Coneystreet,
8. End of Coneystreet near the Common Hall,
9. Door of Adam del Brigg,
10. Gates of St. Peter's Minster,
11. End of Girdlergate in Petergate,
12. On the Pavement.

These stations have been located on the accompanying map of medieval York.¹⁸ One should note that the first playing area is at the gates of the Holy Trinity Priory (where the register of the plays was kept), just a few yards from Pageant Green (where the warehouses used for storing the pageant wagons were located). The route crosses Ousebridge, turns left toward the Gild Hall, then right toward the gates of York Minster, and finally right again, heading toward the Pavement, the final stop indicated in practically all of the lists.¹⁹ Whether the route of the pageant wagons included in this final stretch the extremely narrow Shambles, or whether it followed the somewhat wider Colliergate is not entirely clear, but if the Shambles were on the playing route, then a strict physical limitation would have been imposed upon the size of the pageant wagon by the narrowness of that street.²⁰ Further, the wagons must have been somewhat under sixteen feet in width, apparently the width of Ousebridge in the Middle Ages.²¹ Although exact sizes

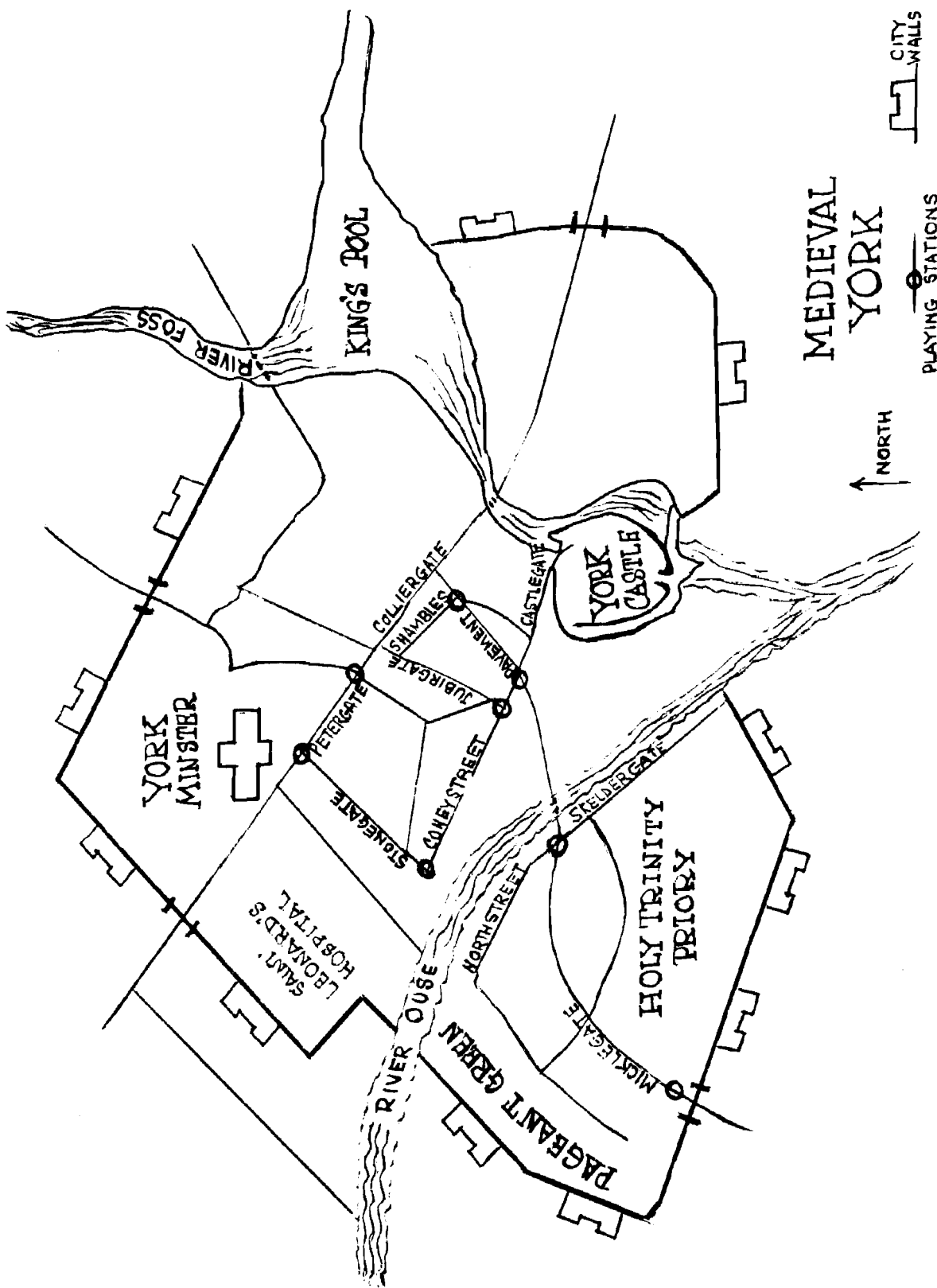
¹⁷ *York Memorandum Book*, MS A/Y, fol. 19b. Future references will be to the MS title. *The York Memorandum Book* was published in two volumes, ed. by Maud Sellers, for the Surtees Society, 1912 and 1915. Translations from French and Latin are my own. I have endeavored, wherever possible, to deal directly with MS sources of the York records rather than to reply upon edited copies.

¹⁸ Based on George Benson, *An Account of the City and County of the City of York*, II, fig. 15.

¹⁹ Cf. Anna J. Mill, "The Stations of the York Corpus Christi Play," *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, XXXVII (1951), 495.

²⁰ Young, p. 9. The shape and size of the pageant wagons have not been definitely established.

²¹ Angelo Raine, *Mediaeval York*, p. 222.



cannot be specified, some of the pageant wagons, at least, must have been substantial structures that would have required considerable effort to transport along the appointed route. The ten expenditures for wheels and wheel repair recorded by the Bakers over a period of only thirteen years indicate a heavy wagon.²² The route covered by these vehicles measures some 1600 yards, thus making the average distance between twelve playing stations roughly 145 yards, as can be seen in Table I. Just how fast the pageant wagons traveled is, of course, not known, but once a wagon was rolling (and records of payment for soap and grease for the axles reveal that care was taken to make them move as easily as possible),²³ it would have been quite simple to have maintained at least an average human walking-speed of about three miles-per-hour, a figure that has been used to deduce the approximate times requisite for moving the pageants from station to station.²⁴

The second problem concerns the actual amount of time that would have elapsed during the playing of the individual pageants. The very least amount of time necessary for the performance of a play may be determined from an oral reading. In actual production, of course, unquestionably the play would have lasted longer, since the gestures, pauses, and movements of actors during times when they would not be speaking would contribute a significant amount of time to an *acted* rather than *spoken* drama. Be that as it may, the shortest of the York plays, XIII, requires some four minutes to read; the longest, XXX, just over thirty minutes; while the two plays closest to the average length of the plays in the cycle, XX and XLVI, some fifteen minutes.

Music was also an integral part of the York plays, a circumstance that further would have extended the cycle playing time.²⁵ An early study of music in the Corpus Christi plays reveals that there are at least twenty-seven songs found in twelve of the York plays; in other words, a full one-fourth of the cycle had music as part of its dramatic structure.²⁶ In addition, minstrels were paid by the city to perform on Corpus Christi Day, although their function, if any, in the actual performance of the plays is not clear. Finally, there was dancing, apparently, in some of the plays of the York cycle.²⁷ Moreover, the pos-

²² Anna J. Mill, "The York Bakers' Play of the Last Supper," *MLR*, XXX (1935), 155-156. Hereafter referred to as Bakers' Accounts.

²³ Maud Sellers (ed.), *The York Mercers and Merchant Adventurers*, p. 72. Hereafter referred to as Mercers' Accounts.

²⁴ The route can be walked at a normal pace in twenty minutes, *i.e.*, three m.p.h.

²⁵ The role of music in medieval drama is a subject entirely too large to enter into fully within the limited scope of this paper. I have felt it necessary to introduce the topic, here, somewhat superficially, primarily to illustrate the effect that the music, inherent in the cycle, would have had on playing time.

²⁶ Fletcher Collins, Jr., "Music in the Craft Cycles," *PMLA*, XLVII (1932), 616. In my own examination of the plays, I have found solid internal evidence of songs in thirteen of the plays, totaling eighteen separate songs, with less firm evidence of the presence of music in two more plays with possibly three more songs.

²⁷ R. W. Ingram, "The Use of Music in English Miracle Plays," *Anglia*, LXXV (1957), 55.

sibilities for spectacle contributed to these pageants by both vocal and instrumental music cannot be ignored, and both the music and the spectacle would certainly have added a significant amount of playing time to the cycle, even if, as is probable, some of the music was played as the pageant wagons were being transported to their next stop as a kind of en route entertainment.

How long, then, would the average play have lasted, considering the time consumed in dialogue, action without dialogue, and music? Certainly, longer than the fifteen minutes allowed by Rose. A more probable time span (although even this estimate seems conservative) would be at least twenty minutes. If the pageant, once it arrived at a station, could have been readied for performance in ninety seconds; and if it also took that amount of time, on the average, to prepare the wagon for moving again once the play were completed; and if these three minutes be added to the twenty-minute average playing time and a two-minute average allowance for travel time between each playing area (thus allowing for a slightly slower pace than three miles-per-hour), the total amount of time required for the average pageant to have set up, played, prepared to travel, and have traveled from one stop to the next would have been twenty-five minutes, as seen in Table II. It follows, then, that if the first pageant began playing at Holy Trinity Priory in Mikelgate at 4:30 a.m.,²⁸ it would have finished its last performance at the Pavement at 9:27 a.m. — a total of four hours and fifty-seven minutes having elapsed from start to finish. Or, to use a different method, if a spectator had arrived at Mikelgate in time for the first performance at 4:30 a.m., remaining there for the entire set of plays, he would have seen the end of the last pageant at 10:40 p.m. (Table III). Since the amount of time necessary for the entire cycle to have played at all twelve stations lacks only two minutes of being twenty-three hours, the last play would have ended at the last station at 3:38 a.m.

It should be emphasized, here, that the times noted in the preceding paragraph are not only conservative but are also very much dependent upon the unlikelihood of 576 flawless performances without any sort of mechanical breakdown, and the assumption that there would have been no subsequent interference with the progress of the pageants from the throngs of holiday spectators. In point of fact, however, there were delays and fights in the performance of the Corpus Christi plays, one such instance causing a delay of more than an hour and resulting in punishment of the responsible parties by civic authorities.²⁹ Some

²⁸ A/Y fol. 255: “. . . every player that shall play be ready in his pageant at convenient time, that is to say, at the midhour between four and five of the clock in the morning.”

²⁹ *York Corporation House Books*, XXI, fol. 46. The House Books have been edited by Angelo Raine and published in eight volumes under the title, *York Civic Records*, for the Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, 1939-1952. Hereafter referred to as HB with volume and folio numbers.

pageant wagons, moreover, were in a poor state of repair, implying that mechanical breakdowns may well have occurred in the presentation of the York plays.³⁰ One can only wonder how many more interruptions of a less serious nature hindered the smooth, steady progress of the plays at York on Corpus Christi Day. Furthermore, the figures quoted above are *averages*. In production, a play composed of an eighty-six line soliloquy would act much more quickly than a 545-line play with ten characters. Thus, in the cycle when a shorter play followed a longer play, the shorter play could have moved no faster than the one preceding it, thus producing rather long periods of inactivity for both the actors and the spectators at various stations during the performance. It would seem, then, that the cycle could have moved no faster at any given time than the slowest play performed at that time, a state of affairs that would have lengthened further the cycle playing time.

Human nature being what it is, I am inclined to believe that the course of these plays could not have been a smooth one. Maintaining a schedule as rigid as that outlined above would have been very nearly impossible, if only because having to perform five straight hours with only five-minute breaks between performances would have been most tiring. Not infrequently, unexpected delays must have cropped up. Actors, even talented and experienced ones, can forget or mix up their lines. Moreover, the so-called ham actor must have existed in all ages of the theatre, and no "ham" is ever anxious to end his performance quickly, simply for the sake of efficiency — particularly if he is performing before friends or relatives, and especially if his moment of glory comes only once a year. The tirades of Herod and Pilate, exhorting crowds to silence (a common device of medieval dramaturgy) so that their plays might begin, indicate that the crowd's reaction definitely would have affected the playing time of a pageant. And might not outstanding productions of individual pageants have resulted in ovations, possibly "curtain calls," or even encores?

Other questions also arise. Did the audience sit or stand throughout an entire seventeen-and-one-half hour performance with only six-or-seven-minute breaks between plays? How much coming and going was there among the spectators? Each year would certain spectators merely have come to see their favorite plays only to have gone on about their business? Certainly, the people of medieval York were greater theatre-lovers than modern man if they enjoyed over seventeen hours of more-or-less continuous drama while we require an intermission during a three-hour motion picture. Moreover, such a style of production would seem to undermine the dramatic unity of cycle drama that critics now tend to perceive.³¹

³⁰ A/Y foll. 80-80b; HB XXI, fol. H.

³¹ See, e.g., the books of Kolve, cited above, and Walter E. Meyers, *A Figure Given: Typology in the Wakefield Plays*.

A more pertinent question, perhaps, concerns lighting. How were the last plays seen? Or, for that matter, who would have seen the first plays since performances began at 4:30 in the morning? The latter question is much easier to answer than the first. The proclamation of 1415 ordering all craftsmen to bring forth their pageants in order and ready to play promptly at 4:30 a. m. is both well known and wondered at.³² But, in reality, that early hour was not at all unreasonable to medieval Yorkers, for the town bell rang for fifteen minutes at 4:00 a. m. in the summer and at 5:00 a. m. in winter.³³ Evidently, the citizens of York were early risers. Indeed, one wonders, noting the length of the entire cycle, why the plays were not begun even earlier, for according to astronomical charts, the sun would have been shining in the York sky for something like an hour before the first play actually began on Corpus Christi Day — given a clear day, of course.³⁴ There would be some seventeen hours of sunlight during the period in which Corpus Christi might fall, and the post-sunset and pre-dawn twilight would contribute some extended hours of vision. Nevertheless, the two hours of darkness centering around midnight would seem to call for some form of artificial lighting in order for the spectators to enjoy the plays staged at that time.³⁵ Expenditures for torches and for lights on Corpus Christi Day are exceedingly numerous in the extant records, but invariably they have no discernible connection with the performance of the plays. In fact, according to the *O. E. D.*, the word *torch* in the Middle Ages meant not only a light, but also a large candle used for devotional purposes. Apparently most of the records concerning lights and torches refer to this kind of candle. For example, the greatest expense listed by the Bakers in the 1543 production of the cycle is for torches, and their pageant vehicle was equipped with two lamps.³⁶ Yet according to Table III, the Bakers' play of *The Last Supper* would have finished playing by 9:20 p. m., well before artificial lighting would have been available. It might well be that no form of artificial lighting was available in the

³² Rose, p. 25.

³³ Raine, *York Civic Records*, VII, 138.

³⁴ *The Nautical Almanac for the Year 1970*. Sunrise on May 23, the first day on which Corpus Christi can fall, is 3:46 a. m.; sunset is 8:08 p. m. On June 9, midway into the period in which Corpus Christi can occur, sunrise is 3:29 a. m. and sunset is 8:30 p. m. On June 24, the last day on which Corpus Christi can fall, sunrise is 3:28 a. m. and sunset is 8:36 p. m. The length of time around midnight without twilight varies from three hours and thirty-four minutes on May 28 to one hour and thirty minutes on June 24. These figures are for Greenwich Mean Time, fifty-four degrees latitude. Thus, the precise hour and minute of any particular sunrise or sunset may vary at York, but the total hours of darkness (which, after all, is the important thing) will be the same. The average amount of darkness for the period is between two and two-and-one-half hours.

³⁵ A/Y foll. 257-257b. offers proof that some of the plays were, indeed, performed after dark: "The Masons of this city used to complain . . . [that] they were rarely or never able to produce their pageant and play in clear daylight as the pageants preceding it."

³⁶ Bakers' Accounts, pp. 147, 156.

needed. Assuredly most of the torches referred to in the York civic records were for processional and devotional, not dramatic, purposes.³⁷ Middle Ages would have sufficed for the enjoyment of drama (as opposed to a mere viewing). Consider, for instance, the case of the 1457 Coventry Corpus Christi plays which, even for the Queen, could not finish playing because of darkness.³⁸

Rose is responsible for raising another question: why should all of the players have assembled at 4:30 in the morning, ready to play at the first station and ready to follow the preceding pageants promptly, when many of them would not even have begun to play until well after noon?³⁹ Yet the Mercers, whose play of *Doomsday* was the last to be presented, have recorded in 1467 an expenditure of 6d. to have their pageant put about in the morning.⁴⁰ There would seem to be no logical reason for this action had the Mercers not actually needed their wagon until late in the evening. Furthermore, where did the pageant wagons go after they had completed the circuit? The only return route to the storage area of Pageant Green was across Ousebridge, the only bridge suitable for wheeled traffic crossing the Ouse in medieval York.⁴¹ To have returned a pageant wagon to its storage area along this path would have meant traversing almost half of the pageant route — and going against the flow of traffic. Surely, two pageant wagons meeting on the narrow streets of medieval York, crowded with throngs of people who had assembled to witness the plays, would have slowed down if not completely have halted the progress of the cycle. Moreover, it would seem rather anti-climactic to be wheeling back a completed pageant past another that was in the process of playing, not to mention the disturbance that such action would have caused among the spectators. Or were the wagons perhaps kept in one area once they had finished playing?⁴²

The extant records concerning Corpus Christi drama at York are simply not complete, of course, and they sometimes tend to raise more questions than they can be called upon to answer. Certainly, in regard to the present problem of the staging time of the York plays, no definitive answer can be given unless new documentary evidence is discovered. Nevertheless, it must be obvious that the traditional view of the staging of all of the York plays in a single day of no more than

³⁷ Cf. Lawrence Blair, "A Note on the Relation of the Corpus Christi Procession to the Corpus Christi Play in England," *MLN*, LV (1940), 86-94.

³⁸ Rose, p. 24. I am aware of Arthur Brown's caveat concerning the application of data from one location to the plays of another (*Franciplegius*, pp. 269-270), and I do so here and elsewhere solely for purposes of comparison, not for proof.

³⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁰ Mercers' Accounts, p. 63.

⁴¹ Angelo Raine, *Mediaeval York*, p. 219.

⁴² Some records indicate that the pageant wagon may have been taken back to its storage area some days after the production on Corpus Christi Day. See Mercers' Accounts, pp. 70-72 and Bakers' Accounts, p. 156.

fifteen hours can no longer be considered as the only possibility for the staging of cycle drama at York.

At this point, I would like to suggest several possible alternative views for consideration along with the traditional one. First of all, there are a few staging possibilities for which no real support exists in the surviving records, although by themselves they are not implausible. For instance, the cycle could have been performed in its entirety in a processional manner at a large number of stations if more than one day were taken for the production, as occurred at Chester and, possibly, at Wakefield. The evidence, however, is overwhelmingly in support of a performance on a single day at York.⁴³

Another notion is that the plays were perhaps grouped, with several plays being performed continuously on one wagon before it was moved on to the next stop. Or possibly one group of plays could have played in one station continuously for the entire day while the audience moved from station to station along the route after the manner of the royal entry of Henry VII in 1486.⁴⁴ Some support for these two ideas comes from the plays themselves. For example, plays I-VI, dealing with the Creation and the Fall, are similar enough in stage requirements so that a single pageant wagon could have served for all, whether or not a single cast of actors performed these six plays. Similarly, plays XXV-XXXVI, concerning Easter Week up through the Crucifixion, could have been staged in a single area on several different pageant wagons. In l. 15 of play XXXII,⁴⁵ for instance, Pilate, in his opening harangue, instructs the crowd not to leave until he has finished, a business that indicates that the crowd itself may have moved from pageant to pageant. However, the majority of the evidence supports the opposite view, for fully one-half of the plays end with the actor's bidding farewell to the crowd as he moves on. In fact, in play XL, l. 192, the pilgrim in his final speech states that he must hurry on, for the other plays are pressing in upon him. In addition, records concerning the renting of seats at arranged stations suggest that the entire show would pass any one point on the route.⁴⁶ Further, it is also possible to think that every play was not performed in any one presentation of the cycle. For example, only a single pageant, the Mercers', was presented in a special showing for the visit of Henry VIII.⁴⁷ Records also

⁴³ See HB I, fol. 14b: "No player that shall play in the Corpus Christi play shall be conducted and retained to play twice *on the day of the play*." (Italics mine.) See, also, HB XXIII, foll. 49b-50; and A/Y foll. 19b; 187b-188; 247-247b; 278-278b; 283b; 291b and 331b.

⁴⁴ HB VI, foll. 15b-18.

⁴⁵ All references are to Smith's edition.

⁴⁶ See A/Y foll. 187b-188, 331b; and HB XXIV, fol. 140. Cf., also, Anna J. Mill, "The Stations of the York Corpus Christi Play," *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, XXXVII (1951), 492-502.

⁴⁷ HB XV, foll. 36-36b. The entertainment staged on the Mercers' pageant was not, in this instance, however, a Corpus Christi play.

tell of pageant wagons that had fallen into a state of decay.⁴⁸ Surely, the play belonging to such a pageant wagon could not have been performed if the wagon were inoperable, but, again, the major evidence points to a performance of the full, rather than a partial, cycle. The numerous references to the billets of the play indicate that every craft was to present its play on Corpus Christi Day.⁴⁹ Other references which state that every craft should present its play in its proper order indeed strongly suggest that every craft was represented in any one presentation of the cycle.⁵⁰

Perhaps the most plausible hypothesis is that a method of fixed staging similar to that of Wakefield obtained at York.⁵¹ According to this view, the pageant wagons would have followed the prescribed route, perhaps presenting dumb shows as they proceeded, but no plays would have been acted until all the wagons had reached a specified playing area. The wagons would, then, have pulled into a round for the performance of the cycle, a form of presentation widely used in medieval drama.⁵² If the plays were performed at one place, possibly in a round, the audience would have turned from pageant to pageant to witness the action, while the actors, too, might have moved from fixed pageant wagon to fixed pageant wagon, thus reconciling the references in the texts of the plays concerning movement from one area to another by both audience and actors. Adding further support to such an idea is the possibility that various crafts at York may have shared a pageant wagon. Definitely such was the case at Chester, where there were only half as many pageant wagons as there were plays.⁵³ In Coventry, moreover, a number of crafts shared the same pageant.⁵⁴ While the assumption is that each craft at York had its own pageant wagon, nevertheless only thirteen are firmly on record as having owned a pageant vehicle.⁵⁵ It is quite possible, of course, that wagons of other guilds

⁴⁸ A/Y foll. 80-80b; HB XXI fol. H.

⁴⁹ A/Y foll. 252b-254-b; HB XIX fol. 69b; XXI foll. 31, 85; XXIII fol. 49b.

⁵⁰ A/Y foll. 187b-188, 291b. The former record reads, in part, ". . . all the pageants of the play, called *Corpus Christi play*, are to be held and produced in their sequence . . ."

⁵¹ Cf. Rose, pp. 40-42.

⁵² Richard Southern, *The Medieval Theatre in the Round*, p. 64.

⁵³ F. M. Salter, *Medieval Drama in Chester*, p. 61.

⁵⁴ Craig, p. 296.

⁵⁵ The Bakers, Goldsmiths, Skinners, and Mercers all owned pageant houses. Cf. *York Memorandum Book*, MS B/Y foll. 40-40b, 42, 42b; Mercers' Accounts, p. 49. (The B/Y MS has been edited by Joyce W. Percy for the Surtees Society. Although I have been unable to obtain a copy of the edited records, I am in possession of Mrs. Percy's transcript of pertinent B/Y entries, and she has assured me that this transcript is both accurate and complete.) The Bakers' pageant and the Mercers' pageant are specifically referred to in the records. Cf. Bakers' Accounts, p. 147; and Mercers' Accounts, pp. 104-105. The Cooks, Bowyers, Weavers, and Painters and Pinners leased storage space for their pageants. Cf. HB IX foll. 3b-4; Bakers' Accounts, p. 155. The Ironmongers and Sledmen had pageants in a state of disrepair. Cf. A/Y foll. 80-80b; HB XXI fol. H. The Litsters were involved in litigation concerning a pageant house. Cf. A/Y fol. 163b. The Carpenters received new wheels for their pageant wagon. Cf. HB VIII

could have been stored in private buildings or gild halls and that no records have survived concerning their occupancy, or that they could have been disassembled and stored in basements of private houses, as were some at Chester. Still, the possibility remains that several crafts could have shared one pageant wagon.

A strong factor in support of the theory of a fixed staging of the York plays is that the final station is traditionally the Pavement. This area has been authoritatively described as the "oldest open space in York," a traditional meeting place, the business center of the town, and the "busiest part of York."⁵⁶ It was also, according to the same source, the center of municipal entertainment, from hangings to bull-baiting. Thus, the Pavement would have presented an area large enough to stage the complete cycle, and it would have had the additional advantage of being the most frequented section of the city, a natural gathering place traditionally associated with public events.

Finally, the proclamation requiring all the pageants to be ready at 4:30 a. m. would make more sense in this view, as would the record showing that the Mercers had their pageant pulled about in the morning of Corpus Christi Day. For if all the pageants were ready to leave Pageant Green through Mikelgate at 4:30 in the morning, they could have followed the route indicated on the map, perhaps presenting dumb shows en route, and still all have arrived at the Pavement, ready to play, within an hour. Using the earlier posited average of twenty minutes per performance (which would be accurate in this context, for if the plays were acted only once during the day, an average would obtain), and allowing two minutes between plays, the cycle would have ended around 11:00 p. m., just when the torches that might have been necessary for illuminating the *Doomsday* pageant would have been striking in their dramatic effectiveness.

Yet, 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. Consider, for example, the following: craftsmen are to accompany their pageant as it plays throughout the town, banners are to be placed in the locations where the plays are to be played, pageants are to perform in order in the play of Corpus Christi, the Mayor (and on two occasions, the King) viewed the plays from one of many playing stations.⁵⁷ Even though complaints were made about the multitude of pageants, about

fol. 101-101b. The Ostlers' pageant was repaired. Cf. Chamberlains' Rolls 1: 2, ml. General references to the reparation and maintenance of a pageant may or may not indicate ownership of a wagon: see A/Y foll. 128b-129a, 283b. There are several indications that a wagon was shared. The Cordwainers, for instance, speak of their pageant and its many plays (A/Y fol. 76a), the Carpenters for a time shared their wagon with the Cartwrights (A/Y foll. 252b-254b), and the Painters and Pinner merged their plays in 1422 (A/Y foll. 247-247b).

⁵⁶ Raine, *Mediaeval York*, pp. 177-179.

⁵⁷ A/Y foll. 292-292b; 19b; 187b-188; HB VI fol. 107.

having to play after dark, about the holding the procession and the plays of Corpus Christi on the same day,⁵⁶ nevertheless, the York Corpus Christi plays do seem to have been performed all in a single day. But the extent of that day must be stretched far beyond those limits set by most adherents of the traditional view, *e. g.*, from fifteen to almost twenty-four hours.

How many people would have, or could have, watched the cycle continuously for this length of time is a matter of conjecture. But those who stayed for a complete performance would have been richly rewarded, for thematically and artistically the plays would have been most effective if they had encompassed a complete twenty-four day. *Doom-day* would be extremely effective if performed at sunrise or with the red glow of the dawn in the background. The cycle of God's world, from the dawn of Creation to the dawn of the day of Final Judgment; 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.

TABLE I
LENGTH OF ROUTE AND TRAVEL TIME

Stations	Approximate Distance (in Yards)	Approximate Time *	
		Minutes	Seconds
I-II	153 (average)	1	45
II-III	153 (average)	1	45
III-IV	153 (average)	1	45
IV-V	200	2	20
V-VI	80	1	0
VI-VII	120 (average)	1	20
VII-VIII	120 (average)	1	20
VIII-IX	120 (average)	1	20
IX-X	120 (average)	1	20
X-XI	180	2	0
XI-XII	200	2	20
Total	1600	18	15
Average	145.5	1	40

* Travel time figured at 3 mph (88 yards per minute).

⁵⁸ Cf. A/Y foll. 247-247b; 257-257b; 278-278b.

TABLE II
PLAYING TIME FOR FIRST THREE PLAYS AT 12 STATIONS

Station	Play I	Play II	Play III
I	4:30 a.m. *	4:53 a.m.	5:16 a.m.
II	4:55	5:18	5:41
III	5:20	5:43	6:06
IV	5:45	6:08	6:31
V	6:10	6:33	6:56
VI	6:35	6:58	7:21
VII	7:00	7:23	7:46
VIII	7:25	7:48	8:11
IX	7:50	8:13	8:36
X	8:15	8:38	9:01
XI	8:40	9:03	9:26
XII	9:05	9:28	9:51
End	9:27**	9:50	10:13

	<i>Minutes</i>
Average playing time	20
Preparation for travel before the performance	1½
Preparation for travel after the performance	1½
Time necessary for travel between stations	2
Total	25

* Times indicated denote the point at which the pageant would be ready to begin playing.

** Total time necessary for one pageant to play at each stop: 4 hours, 57 minutes.

TABLE III

TIMES AT WHICH EACH PLAY WILL BEGIN PLAYING AT THE FIRST STATION AND FINISH PLAYING AT THE LAST STATION

P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
4:30 a.m.	4:53	5:16	5:39	6:02	6:25
9:27 a.m.	9:50	10:13	10:36	10:59	11:22
P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12
6:48 a.m.	7:11	7:34	7:57	8:20	8:43
11:45 a.m.	12:08 p.m.	12:31	12:54	1:17	1:40
P13	P14	P15	P16	P17	P18
9:06 a.m.	9:29	9:52	10:15	10:38	11:01
2:03 p.m.	2:26	2:49	3:12	3:35	3:58
P19	P20	P21	P22	P23	P24
11:24 a.m.	11:47	12:10 p.m.	12:33	12:56	1:19
4:21 p.m.	4:44	5:07	5:30	5:53	6:16
P25	P26	P27	P28	P29	P30
1:42 p.m.	2:05	2:28	2:51	3:14	3:37
6:39 p.m.	7:02	7:25	7:48	8:11	8:34
P31	P32	P33	P34	P35	P36
4:00 p.m.	4:23	4:46	5:09	5:32	5:55
8:57 p.m.	9:20	9:43	10:06	10:29	10:52
P37	P38	P39	P40	P41	P42
6:18 p.m.	6:41	7:04	7:27	7:50	8:13
11:15 p.m.	11:38	12:01 a.m.	12:24	12:47	1:10
P43	P44	P45	P46	P47	P48
8:36 p.m.	8:59	9:22	9:45	10:08	10:31
1:33 a.m.	1:56	2:19	2:42	3:05	3:28

Time required for the entire cycle to play at one station – 17 hours, 21 minutes.

Time required for the complete cycle to play at every station – 22 hours, 58 minutes.

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