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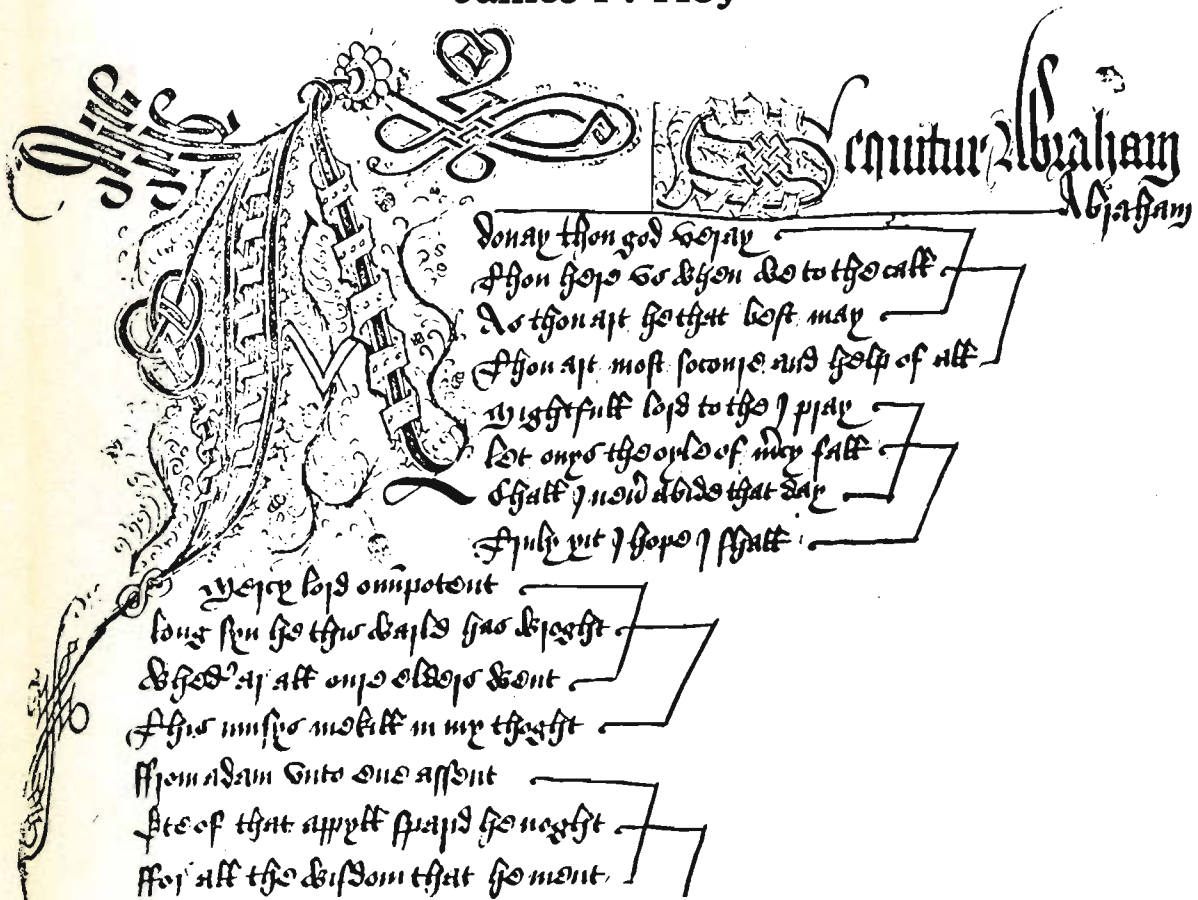
STUDIES

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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 onys the orld of may fall
I shall I now abide that day
I praye yet I hope I shall

We praye lord omnipotent
long for he the daye has brought
I shall I now abide that day
I praye yet I hope I shall
I shall I now abide that day
I praye yet I hope I shall

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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

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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

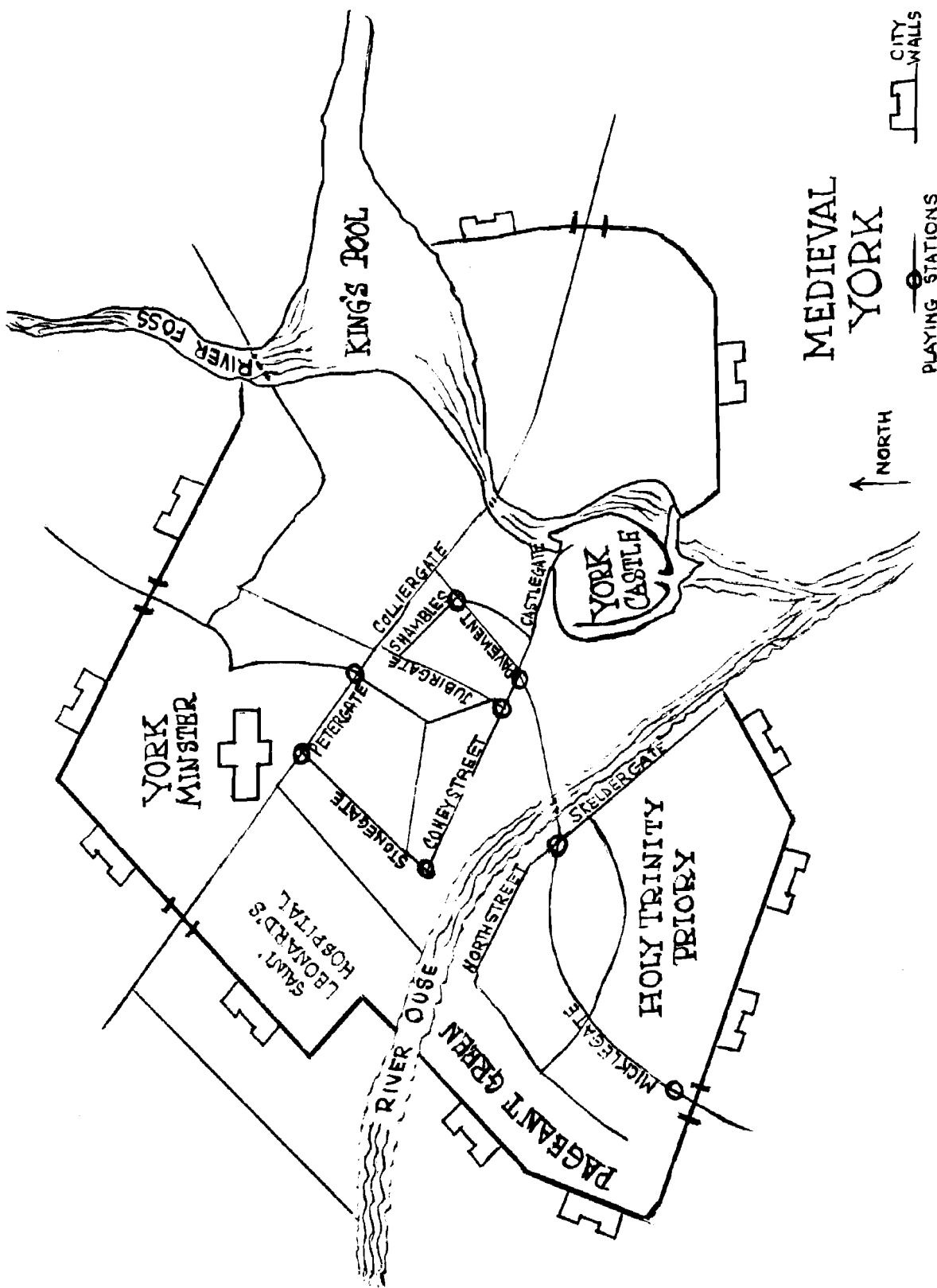
¹⁷ *York Memorandum Book*, MS A/Y, fol. 19b. Future references will be to the MS title. *The York Memorandum Book* was published in two volumes, ed. by Maud Sellers, for the Surtees Society, 1912 and 1915. Translations from French and Latin are my own. I have endeavored, wherever possible, to deal directly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

