

**Nicole R. Rice and Margaret Aziza Pappano.** *The Civic Cycles: Artisan Drama and Identity.* Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015. Pp 360.

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This is an important book. For the first time, we have a well-researched and helpful study of the place of the artisan class in the production of the civic religious drama. The authors make clear that the civic cycle is a uniquely English form of drama writing: ‘Though many aspects of premodern artisan identity are pan-European, the cycle drama produced by craftsmen, as an artisan centered enterprise, is a distinctly English urban phenomenon’ (19). In fact, it is a northern English phenomenon. The artisans whose activities form the heart of this study are clearly distinguished as the master craftsmen who formed the ‘middle rank’ between the merchants on the one hand, who were the political elite (especially in York), and the unfranchised artisans who ‘worked as servants, waged laborers, or pieceworkers either under or in competition with master craftsmen’ (4–5) on the other. This study adds much to our understanding of the social and commercial structures of York and Chester during the years the plays in those cities flourished and supplements the work of scholars who ‘in emphasizing the role of the merchants in shaping the plays ha[ve] not fully analysed the plays in artisanal terms’ (4). The authors have drawn widely from the work of social and commercial historians and the surviving records of York and Chester to show the place of the master craftsmen and their skills in the production of the plays.

Although they rely heavily on the records contained in *REED: York* and *REED: Cheshire*, the authors have gone beyond those records, finding other aspects of the interaction of the crafts in other original material in the records of both cities that they feel helped determine the way the plays were performed. A good example is in the first chapter, ‘New Beginnings’, where the authors analyse the strained relationships between some of the closely related guilds in York that led to the unseemly brawls that marred the annual Corpus Christi Procession that, for the first sixty years of the civic celebration of the feast, preceded the play. They argue that the disputes between the good and bad angels in the first pageant, ‘The Creation and Fall of Lucifer’, reflect actual guild animosity and that the plays that follow in both cycles depicting the creation of the world introduce us to the ‘master craftsman’, God the Father, who throughout the plays, is the model of all ‘makers’. The true beginning of the artisanal ‘cycle’ for the

authors seems not to be the dramatization of the apocryphal story of the Fall of Lucifer but the creation story from Genesis.

Chapter 3, 'Fair Trade: Masters, Servants and Local Identity in the York Cycle', discusses how specific episodes, particularly in the *York Plays*, dramatize the relationship of 'servants' — that is, unfranchised workers — to their masters. They focus on Judas in the York Passion sequence and Cain in the fragmentary York Cain and Abel episode. Both discussions are marred by the tight focus of the authors on the artisanal theme without reference to the textual issues in both passages. The argument about Judas, as an unruly servant, works well as part of their artisanal concerns, but they do not mention that this characterization of Judas appears only in the complex sequence of pageants revised in the 1420s and presents the consistent view of the reviser about the character of Judas. The discussion of the Cain and Abel episode does not make clear to the reader that two folios — more than half the pageant — are missing, although the authors do make it clear how the surviving sixteenth century addition of the character 'Brewbarret' as a 'bad servant, echoing the bad example of his master' (154) reflects the deterioration of relationships among the lower classes in the later period.

Chapter 3 offers much of social and commercial interest but it also demonstrates what, to me, is the major disappointment of this book. It does not consider the recent detailed textual scholarship that has revealed far more than was previously known about the nature of the two plays through careful analyses of the play manuscripts. The careful new editions of the two plays by Richard Beadle for *York* and Robert Lumiansky and David Mills for *Chester* and the extensive commentary of those editors and the work of other textual scholars such as Peter Meredith are not considered in detail.<sup>1</sup> For example, in chapter 4, 'Spinsters, Laborers, and Alewives: the Regulation of Women's Work in Chester', the authors do not acknowledge that all the surviving manuscripts of the full text of Chester postdate any performance by at least sixteen years. Also, in their discussion of the unique episode of the damned Alewife in the Harrowing of Hell, the authors muse about whether 'since ... it appears that Chester artisans paid for new copies of their play in the years when it was performed' the episode appeared every time the play was presented (187). This comment assumes that the Chester guilds performed the same episodes every time the Play was performed. Clearly, however, from the version of the play that Christopher Goodman describes as planned for performance in 1572, in Chester the Biblical story could be divided in widely different ways each time the sequence was performed.<sup>2</sup>

The authors also seem to assume that the guilds wrote their own plays and that the manuscripts represent 'some of the earliest works of literature by a largely

nonliterate class' (24). They acknowledge the work of Sarah Beckwith and Pamela King (5) but resolutely set it aside.<sup>3</sup> The volume's primary focus is the specific interests and concerns of the artisans, as far as the authors can determine them, ignoring every other aspect of the environment in which the plays were performed. For example, especially in their consideration of the *York Plays*, the authors did not take into account the work done on pastoral didacticism in the province of York by Jonathan Hughes and others. They also do not recognize that, within the sequence of episodes themselves, there is 'immense verbal density with images, ideas and phrases echoing from episode to episode tying the forty-eight surviving pageants together in a powerful Christian statement'.<sup>4</sup> The authors do acknowledge the larger context of the plays, commenting that 'commerce and Christianity penetrate ... completely in the York Corpus Christi play' (143), but, for them, the late medieval Catholic context of the plays takes second place to the commercial one.

Much of their analysis of individual episodes in both 'cycles' is based on the use of specific words such as 'search' in chapter 2 or actions such as the charitable works in chapter 5, ignoring the source text — the scriptures. For example, the discussion in chapter 5, 'Last Judgment in York and Chester' (which is a good and interesting study of two very different presentations of Judgment), fails to acknowledge that the source of most of the York text is Mt 25:31–46, choosing instead to emphasize that the acts of charity represented are specifically related to the charitable practices of the Mercers in their guise as the Guild of Holy Trinity with their hospital in Fossgate, rather than the over-reaching Christian doctrine of love and compassion.

In the epilogue, the authors analyse the changed religious and political situations in northern England and discuss the 'after life' of civic ceremonial, emphasizing the long-standing tradition of the Chester Midsummer Show where vestiges of the suppressed plays with their guild associations survived in the shepherds walking on stilts and the famous 'afterlife' of the Chester Alewife. This tradition is in contrast to York's short lived secular interlude, written by a school master and sponsored by the city but without the involvement of the guilds.

Much has been written about the civic cycles in the last few decades but this book is the first to take a sophisticated and well researched approach to the commercial context of the performance of the plays. The authors are aware of the wider didactic, political and literary context but have chosen to confine themselves to the commercial concerns of the men in York and Chester who actually performed the plays. In their treatment of the two 'civic cycles' with surviving texts and records, Rice and Pappana have not only provided us with an expanded

commercial context for the plays; they have also shown how very different the plays were in the commercial context of the two northern cities.

## Notes

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- 1 Richard Beadle (ed.), *The York Plays* EETS ss 23 and 24 (Oxford, 2009 and 2010); Robert Lumiansky and David Mills (eds), *The Chester Mystery Cycle* EETS ss 3 and 9 (Oxford, 1974 and 1986); Peter Meredith, 'John Clerke's hand in the York Register', *Leeds Studies in English* 12 (1981) 245–71, and 'Scribes, Texts and Performances' in Paula Neuss (ed.), *Aspects of Early English Drama* (Cambridge, 1984) 13–29.
- 2 Baldwin, Elizabeth, Lawrence M. Clopper and David Mills (eds) *REED: Cheshire* (Toronto, 2007), 1.147–8.
- 3 Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Art in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago, 2001); Pamela M. King, *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* (Cambridge, 2006).
- 4 Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The *York Cycle* and the Libraries of York', Caroline Barron and Jenny Stratford (eds), *The Church and Learning in the Late Middle Ages* (Donnington, 2002), 356.