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## Raging in the Streets of Medieval York

In 1535 a man by the name of Robert Crow wrote out the playbooks of two pageants in the Coventry Corpus Christi Play: one was for the guild of Weavers and the other for the Shearmen and Taylors. A stage direction from the 'Slaughter of the Innocents' sequence in the Shearmen and Taylors' *Nativity* pageant:

*Here Erode ragis in the pagond and in the strete also* (l.783 sd)<sup>1</sup>

provided the jumping-off point for the Toronto symposium paper on the York Corpus Christi Play that formed the basis for this essay. Robert Crow's precise identity, and even whether he was one man, or two, or even three, remains a mystery. The editor of the Coventry records for the Records of Early English Drama project, Reginald Ingram, envisaged two men. His first Robert Crow was a capper, and the second, a practical man of the theatre with many talents, serving as 'writer, actor, (and) properties' man for the Drapers' and as 'reviser' of the two playbooks in 1535.<sup>2</sup> Whether the 'reviser' invented the stage direction for Herod's raging and other explicit directions in the two texts, or merely copied them from earlier versions, is, like Crow himself, uncertain. His name will appear a number of times in the discussion that follows, but the question addressed here does not concern him directly. The issue is whether actors in medieval York, like the Coventry Herod, took advantage of additional street-level playing space.

My argument is based on a number of foundations: modern 'original-staging' experiments;<sup>3</sup> recent studies of the professional stage of late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century London; and a review of some medieval documentary materials. I contend that the textual signals in the dialogue of the York pageants that a modern director reads as an opportunity for use of the street did not necessarily have this meaning within the conventions of the early English theatre. My examination of the Herod stage direction, and of other directions,

both explicit and implicit, in the Coventry and York pageants is undertaken with a full awareness of the limitations of such material. As Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson have expressed it, explicit stage directions 'can be opaque rather than transparent', and those implicit in dialogue are even 'trickier to interpret'.<sup>4</sup> Consideration of the professional London theatre on which these two scholars have based their research is by no means out of place here for, as is becoming increasingly evident, the lines of demarcation between the medieval theatre and that of the early modern period are blurred. In referring to 'original-staging' experiments, I am conscious of the caveat often stated, but sometimes too quickly forgotten, that modern audiences are not the same as medieval ones. The conclusions to be drawn from audience reaction to these experiments must always be left open. Furthermore, it is unlikely that any single model of performance was used exclusively in York. As is the case in modern reconstructed performances of a series of pageants orchestrated by different groups, methods would not necessarily have been consistent among the medieval guilds of York. In the face of the favourable treatment that street-level playing has been afforded in recent studies, however, I advocate the merits of strictly wagon-based performance, and argue that more 'original-staging' experimentation needs to be done to explore the full potential of this method. The capacity of actors to move an audience and make them part of the performed events without, literally, 'raging in the streets', deserves greater recognition than it has yet received.

Numerous 'original-staging' wagon productions of medieval plays in York have adopted the Coventry Herod's technique, and modern audiences have responded positively. Peter Happé, speaking as an informed member of the 1988 audience for a wagon production on the original processional route, approved of the 'opportunity for unrestricted movement and gesture' in 'space well away from the waggon' that resulted in the audience being 'less distinctly separate from the action'.<sup>5</sup> The success of street-level playing in the modern context has, certainly, been a liberating and instructive experience for early drama enthusiasts, but this does not prove that it was a widespread practice in York in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Nevertheless, Cami Agan and Olga Horner, for example, have taken the use of the street in York as axiomatic.<sup>6</sup> The roadway, in Agan's view, was used for journeys, entrances and exits, and for making a 'more direct contact/connection between the drama and the audience'.<sup>7</sup> Agan uses *The Crucifixion* pageant as an example, hypothesizing that, in medieval performance, the action was presented on the street level until the final moment of the raising of the Cross, when the wagon came into use.<sup>8</sup> This is, without doubt, a possible staging strategy. Agan's thesis, however, while it refers

to Meg Tywcross' landmark production of the York *Resurrection of Christ* pageant in an indoor simulation of street performance in 1977,<sup>9</sup> does not take into account the more recent 'original-staging' production of *The Crucifixion* in York itself in 1992.<sup>10</sup> This performance, masterminded by Philip Butterworth, had all five actors positioned on the wagon, just above waist-height for the average audience member, for the duration of the play (see fig 1).

The stage was bare apart from the Cross and the actors; the modern audience was fully engaged, intimidated, perhaps, but certainly not distanced by the actors' height advantage; and the backdrop of the city of York was completely absorbed into the events of *The Crucifixion*. As I will discuss further below, this production more than amply demonstrated that a very direct 'contact/connection between the drama and the audience' can be achieved, in the modern context, without use of the street.

The appeal of 'raging in the streets of medieval York' is by no means new. In 1911, Netta Syrett's children's story, *The Old Miracle Plays of England*, using the licence allowed to fiction, unashamedly appropriated the Coventry Herod for its charming account of Colin and Margery's day at the York Play:

Roaring and stamping and raving, as he said of himself, the king rushed down the pageant steps and 'raged' in the market-place amongst the people, to the delight of the grown-up folk and the terror of the children in the crowd.<sup>11</sup>



Fig 1. York, 1992, *The Crucifixion* (photo: Margaret Rogerson)

Syrett's imaginary actors entered on (real) horses, 'clattering over the stones of the market-place', and there were moments when street-level dialogue diverted audience attention while the pageant wagon was 'drawn into the midst of the open space'.<sup>12</sup>

There has, however, been some scepticism about too ready an acceptance of Crow's stage direction for Herod's raging as firm proof that street-level playing was the normal practice even in Coventry, let alone in York, where performance conditions were somewhat different. William Tydeman, in his reconstruction of a fifteenth-century York production, adds a significant qualifier to his speculations about the use of the street in the Barkers' *Creation* pageant. He expresses concern that the actors might have experienced difficulty in finding a 'landing-space' in an audience crowded towards the front of the wagon.<sup>13</sup> In answer to these reservations, we can note that the actors taking part in Meg Twycross' 1992 production of *The Resurrection of Christ* in York had little difficulty in marking out their territory on the street and claiming it when the need arose. Tydeman does, however, leave another question mark over the Crow stage direction. He considers that Herod's 'departure from the pageant-waggon stage' was 'very exceptional' on the grounds that the text 'makes a special feature'<sup>14</sup> of it. We should note, at the outset, that the Crow *Nativity* text is alone in the surviving corpus of English *Creation* to *Doomsday* pageants in mentioning street-level playing. Perhaps this is because the practice was too habitual, and the convention of stage directions too minimal at this time, for it to be mentioned elsewhere. But it is significant that, even in the relatively stage-direction rich texts from Chester, there are no references to street-level action. As Tydeman warns, Herod's 'raging in the street' may have been an isolated phenomenon, one that was recorded in the stage direction precisely because it was unusual.

Robert Crow's playbook for the Shearmen and Taylors' *Nativity* pageant was lost in 1879, in a fire at the Birmingham Free Reference Library, where a collection of materials used by Thomas Sharp for his investigation into playmaking in medieval Coventry had been lodged for safe-keeping.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately, Sharp had published two editions of *The Nativity* before the fire, and so the play, along with its reference to Herod's street-level raging, survived for posterity.<sup>16</sup> Any suspicion that the street-level playing direction might be a result of Sharp's editing is dispelled by observation of his meticulous treatment of the Coventry documents in cases where there are extant originals from which to verify his readings. There is no real reason to doubt that this particular direction, or any of the other Middle English stage directions in his published versions, was present in the lost Crow text.

Crow's revision of *The Nativity* contains another explicit reference to street-level playing to confirm the possibility of using space on the roadway in Coventry:

*Here Erod goth away and the iij kyngis speykyth in the strete.* (l.539 sd)

This follows the tyrant's boasting about his power and his determination to exact tribute from any strangers entering his realm. As Herod withdraws to rest (ll.537–9), the Three Kings, who are liable to pay the required tribute, appear to speak their lines. The street-level playing here coincides with a change of scene, and hence facilitates the required exit and entrance. It also leaves the pageant stage as a representation of Herod's court, as a marker of his kingship, and a reminder, even in his absence, of his authority. This authority then asserts itself as it stands above the Three Kings, who are placed in the street. At the very least, then, the use of the street has two functions: of providing exit and entrance space, and of signaling a status distinction between characters. In addition, however, the appropriation of the audience-level of the street for dramatic action sets up emotional links between the ordinary lives of the observers and the extraordinary events presented in the play. As Agan has argued for York, the world of the play and the world of the audience coalesce spatially in a quite literal sense, and the spiritual salvation of the occupants of both worlds is collectively threatened by Herod's enmity.

Herod's 'raging' sequence is indicated explicitly by the stage direction following l.783, but it actually begins after the Messenger brings word of the escape of the Three Kings (ll.768–76). The stage direction implies movement between the pageant stage and the street, with some representation of the 'rage' both on the wagon, where Herod holds his court, and in the street, where he meets his soldiers (l.786). There is a second direction for 'rage' a few lines later in this sequence:

*There Erode ragis ageyne and then seyth thus.* (l.801 sd)

Herod may have still been on the street for this outburst, and have remained there until he dispatched the soldiers to do their murderous deeds (ll.814–17) and, presumably, made his own exit before the sequence in which the Angel warns Mary and Joseph to flee (ll.818–29). As in the earlier sequence with the Three Kings, the use of the street facilitates an exit and entrance, and has the potential benefit of the perceived threat to the audience being enhanced by

the proximity of the tyrant on their own level. His nearness marks them out as possible targets for his wrath, or as members of his army against Christ.

The Weavers' playbook of 1535, the extant Robert Crow revision, has been described by Pamela King as a 'functional' text that may have been a 'prompt copy'.<sup>17</sup> The manuscript has a number of marginal notes, along with sixteen stage directions in Crow's hand. Some of these stage directions indicate different levels for the action, for example:

*There Semeon and his Clarks gothe vp to the tempull and Gaberell cumyth to the tempull dore and seyth* (1.366 sd)

*Here the cum downe with pressession to mete them* (1.636 sd)

*There Mare and Josoff departis owt of the vpper parte of the pagand.* (1.704 sd)  
(emphasis mine)

As King has said, these stage directions guide 'positioning and movement on the elaborate set'.<sup>18</sup> If they are original to Crow, and represent part of his revision of the text, they do indeed prove him to be a practical man of the theatre. Despite the clear references to movement up and down between areas of action, however, there are no indications in the explicit stage directions of this pageant that any part of the performance was consigned to the roadway. It is possible, then, since both Coventry texts were revised by the same man, that the street-level playing was, as Tydeman has implied, a technique favoured by the Shearmen and Taylors, but not by the Weavers. Given that there are detailed instructions for movement on the Weavers' wagon, but none for movement off-wagon, this suggestion gains some weight. On the basis of the evidence available, scanty as it is, the street-level playing in *The Nativity* pageant may have been outside the norm.

As this discussion of street-level playing relies so heavily on the medieval Herod, a consideration of his recorded stage history is in order, for it can shed some further light on medieval theatrical conventions and advance the cause of wagon-based performance as a viable alternative to off-wagon action. The stage Herod's résumé is impressive. His monstrous and colourful behaviour has attracted considerable attention, and he can be regarded as one of the leading lights, not only of the Coventry *Nativity* pageant, but also of the medieval English theatrical world as a whole. The poet Chaucer gave him star status when he listed the feat of playing Herod 'upon a scaffold hye' as one of the accomplishments of Absolon, the rejected suitor of *The Miller's Tale*.<sup>19</sup>

Absolon had many of the skills of the medieval actor for he could dance, play musical instruments, and sing to his lady in a voice that was suitably 'gentil and smal' (l.3360). But, while the street outside Alison's window was the site of the memorable real-life performance of his own vengeful rage with the 'hoote kultour' (l.3812), his stage performance of Herod's rage, if we take Chaucer's brief reference to it literally, was confined to the 'scaffold'.

Herod's rage has been made legendary by Hamlet's often-quoted advice to the travelling players against bad acting:

if you mouth it as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines  
... do not saw the air too much with your hand ... it offends me to the soul to hear  
a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters ... It out-Herods Herod.<sup>20</sup>

The excesses of actors, real or imagined, in the role of Herod, certainly made a strong impression on Shakespeare. These famous lines have prompted more than one scholar to speculate that the raging of the Herod of the Coventry Shearmen and Taylors' pageant may have been their inspiration.<sup>21</sup> Fascinating as this extract is, it tells us only about a typical Herod's delivery of his lines, his vocal extravagance and his over-the-top gesturing with his hands.

It is possible, however, to arrive at a more precise description of the stage business that a medieval actor playing Herod could combine with voice projection and hand gestures. Some details can be extracted from the implicit stage directions embedded in the dialogue that precedes the 'raging in the street' direction in the Coventry *Nativity*. It is clear, from his own words, that Herod expressed his emotional state by foot stamping ('I stampe', l.779) and wild gesturing with the eyes ('I stare; I loke all abowtt', l.779). Regardless of whether or not this staring action can literally be seen, the expression of ferocity and distraction in Herod's eyes is impressed on the audience by his verbal account of it. The expression of the eyes was recognized as a signifier of heated emotions in the rhetorical practice that was so closely aligned to theatrical conventions of the period. Thomas Wilson, whose mid-sixteenth-century *Arte of Rhetorique* is roughly contemporaneous with Crow's dramatic text, confirms the importance of the eyes in his advice on 'gesture':

the iyes are not geuen to man onely to se, but also to shewe, and set forth the meanyng of his mynde, even as unto a Bore are geuen briselles: to a Lyon, the taile: to a horse, his cares: whereby their inclinacions and soubdeine affections are sone espied. When we see a man loke redde in the iyes, his browes bent, his teeth bytyng his upper lip, we judge that he is out of pacience.<sup>22</sup>

The Coventry Herod does not stop at stamping and staring; he also uses lacerating movements ('I rent', l.781), possibly using a sword rather than simply 'sawing the air' with the hand, as in Shakespeare's reference.<sup>23</sup> A sword, as a symbol of his kingship, is likely to have been part of his costume or on-stage properties, and his wielding of it at this point could impart not only the violence of his anger but also his temporal power.<sup>24</sup> Other unspecified gestures indicative of madness and outlandish rage are implied in his final outburst ('run I wode', ie, go mad, l.781). All aspects of the stage presence that the Coventry Herod creates for himself through his dialogue can be traced in the database of stage directions for the Elizabethan theatre compiled by Dessen and Thomson.<sup>25</sup> It is clear, not just from Hamlet's testimony, that these actions continued to be used on the stage to signal anger and madness in the professional London theatre in the period immediately after the suppression of provincial religious drama.

It is also clear that some aspects of the Coventry Herod's staged rage were part of a traditional practice of the medieval actor of biblical pageants. There is evidence for extensive reliance on properties and gestures associated with the Chester Herod's rage in some marginal notations to the Vintners' pageant of *The Three Kings* (ll.157–212).<sup>26</sup> Both David Mills and Peter Meredith have commented on these notations, which, as Mills puts it, offer 'the kind of practical information a producer might note down in the margin to remind himself and his actors of important features of performance'.<sup>27</sup> For the initial tirade delivered to the Kings (ll.157–212), several props are required: 'staffe' (ll.157, 197), 'sword' (ll.163, 201), 'staffe and another gowne' (ll.209–11). There is also a gesture, 'cast up' (l.205), apparently involving the sword. Later in the pageant, there are similar directions associated with Herod's fury: 'sword' (l.288); 'cast downe the sword' (ll.304, 327); 'breake a sword' (l.350); and, finally, the marginal notes revert to the earlier 'cast up' (ll.358, 366, 414), 'staffe and another gowne' (l.363), 'staffe' (l.390), and 'sword' (l.398). These marginal notations are, clearly, a kind of shorthand, and some violent movement around the stage area could have been understood as a subtext by actors familiar with the local playing conventions. Meredith, however, has suggested that, for the first speech (ll.157–212), Herod may not have 'dodged backwards and forwards snatching up props from his throne or the wagon floor or anywhere else' but that 'these props and especially the speed with which they change signal an assistant'.<sup>28</sup> The Chester Herod's reliance on choreographed movements associated with props and costume, then, argues for a theatrical tradition that allowed for the tyrant to 'rage' without scurrying around the acting area. Apart from the Coventry reference to the street, the evidence available about the



medieval Herod confirms that he used the skills common to the orator as well as the actor. His behaviour could, in fact, be classified under the definition of 'pronunciation' in Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique*: 'a framynge of the voyce, countenance and gesture'.<sup>29</sup> What is clear is that props, costume, and standard gestures were important factors in pageant-wagon performance. What is not clear, however, is the amount of movement around, and off, the stage that was expected of the actor as he delivered his lines.

There are very few explicit stage directions in the text of the York Corpus Christi Play, and none of them specifies street-level playing. Furthermore, there is little in the extensive local records to guide us in the matter of how the actors used the performance spaces that were, potentially, available to them. The 1476 council ruling on the requirements made of the actors lists 'connyng', 'voice', and 'personne'.<sup>30</sup> The only other description of actors from York is in the official proclamation for the play included in the 1415 *Ordo Paginarum* gathering, where the players are instructed to be 'well arayed & openly spekyng'.<sup>31</sup> All that can really be said of the York actors on the basis of this material is that they were to look good and be audible.

Before we attempt to apply the evidence for street-level playing from Coventry to the York context, we need to acknowledge the differences between the two towns and their plays. For York there is a long documented history of the pageant route and the approximate locations of, on average, twelve playing stations. In contrast, Coventry's route and the number of stations have not been recovered definitively but the consensus is in favour of three playing stations along a route that, roughly, traversed the city centre between Gosford Gate and Bishop Gate.<sup>32</sup> York had a total of forty-seven pageants; Coventry had only ten.<sup>33</sup> The larger part of the Coventry Play has been lost but the two pageants that have survived are roughly the equivalent in length and subject matter of three of the York texts. This still makes the hypothetical Coventry Play considerably shorter than its York counterpart, a difference that is compounded by the disparity in the number of playing stations.<sup>34</sup> Taken at their face value, the numbers point to a significant divergence between the performance conditions in York and Coventry. This precludes any easy transfer of assumptions from the one place to the other. If the Coventry Play was presented in fewer places and the playing places were spacious enough to accommodate large audiences, then street-level playing would be more feasible and more attractive.

At this point, I turn to a closer consideration of 'implicit' as opposed to 'explicit' stage directions in medieval dramatic texts and to an investigation of the York Play itself. While there are very few explicit stage directions to assist us in the registered pageants at York, there are large numbers of

implicit directions in the dialogue to compensate for this deficiency. We do not find detailed directions for stage action of the kind found, for example, for the lively stage free-for-all in Thomas Preston's late-sixteenth-century play, *Cambises*:

*Heer let them fight with their staves, not come neer an-other by three or foure yardes; the Vice set them on as hard as he can; one of their wives come out, and all to-beat the Vice; he run away.  
Enter Marian May-be-good, Hobs wife, running in with a broome, and parte them.<sup>35</sup>*

Yet a clear outline of an equally energetic skirmish involving Noah, his wife, and sons emerges from the dialogue in the York pageant of *The Flood*, particularly between lines 89 and 120. The Wife wants to go home:

Farewele, I wille go home agayne (l.92)<sup>36</sup>

but she must be restrained, and Noah, apparently unable to do this alone, has to enlist the aid of his sons:

Helpe, my sonnes, to holde her here (l.101)

Still, the matter is not completely settled at this point, and the dialogue has a subtext of pulling and scuffling as the Wife continues to state her determination to leave them to their fate in the Ark until, finally, she agrees to do God's will. Even so, she has the last word as well as the last blow:

What, wenys þou so for to go qwitte?  
Nay, be my trouthe, þou getis a clowte. (ll.119–20)

Many of the stage directions implicit in the York pageant texts suggest, as Agan has noted, journeys that take the characters from place to place in the course of the action, while others function as initial 'entrances' and final 'exits' at the beginning and end of the individual episodes. These movements can be identified readily from a reading of the pageants or from even a cursory examination of the lists under verbs of motion like 'go' in the published concordance of the York Play.<sup>37</sup> An entrance from the street is implied, for example, in the opening lines of *The Shepherds*:

Bredir, in haste takis heede and here  
What I wille speke and specifie;

*Sen we walke þus*, withouten were,  
 What mengis my moode nowe meve yt will I. (ll.1–4) (italics mine)

Entrance through the audience on the street would serve the practical purpose of flowing directly from the movement of wagon and actors from one playing station to the next. It would also serve the theatrical purpose of making a direct link between the Shepherds, who were to discover the miracle of the Christ Child, and the audience, out of whose midst they appeared. This would seem even more practical and appropriate if, as Richard Beadle has suggested, *The Shepherds* was ‘performed “in tandem” with *The Nativity* pageant.’<sup>38</sup> In this case, the destination towards which the Shepherds were hastening would be the wagon for the previous episode. This wagon would be in place already and firmly established for the audience as the stable of Bethlehem, where the miracle had just taken place.

There are numerous examples of initial entrances that could be made using the street as playing area, and there are also numerous examples of final exits that we would regard as lending themselves to this technique. The actor playing the Herod of the York *Slaughter of the Innocents* pageant, for example, might well have been ‘raging in the streets’ when he pronounced the final lines of the registered text:

*Comes aftir* as yhe canne,  
 For *we will wende before*. (ll.279–80) (italics mine)

Opportunities for street-level playing present themselves time and again within the action of the pageants as well as at the beginning and end. In the *Slaughter* episode, the arrival of the messenger (l.73), his departure (l.132), the arrival of the soldiers (l.163), their departure (l.192), the slaughter itself (ll.194–233), and the return of the soldiers to Herod (ll.234–41) could be played very effectively in the street. The wagon could represent Herod’s court, a vantage point from which the cruel tyrant could watch as his minions went about their murderous mission among the women of Bethlehem. The human tezzror would be conveyed as the actors playing the soldiers pursued their prey through the ranks of innocent bystanders watching the performance, thereby making them members of the community under threat in the play.

A modern director of the York pageants, then, does not need explicit stage directions simply because the directions implicit in the text itself shape the action and the movements of the actors. But are we reading only through modern eyes, with modern expectations that reference in the dialogue to a

gesture or a movement around the stage will be matched by the behaviour of the actors? It is this preconception that makes the end of both acts of *Waiting for Godot* work for modern audiences. The jarring disjunction between the implicit stage direction, 'Yes, let's go', and the explicit direction, '*They do not move*', that keeps Vladimir and Estragon waiting on the road, is a challenge to our expectations.<sup>39</sup> These same expectations should not be allowed to inhibit our exploration of the possibilities of the theatre of the Middle Ages. Theatrical tastes and approaches to performance have changed over time, and we should continue to explore the potential of the York texts in their context. While 'original-staging' performances demonstrate that adherence to implicit stage directions that take the actors off-wagon works in modern production, Alan Dessen's work on the Shakespearean set and his study of stage directions in Elizabethan plays can offer us a different model for our approach to the medieval situation. Dessen plays down the need for a literal interpretation of the Shakespearean set, arguing that the 'trees, castles, walls, bushes, gardens, and caves' referred to in the dialogue 'most likely were to be imagined by the playgoer rather than introduced onstage'.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, he suggests flexibility in the way an audience can be encouraged to perceive the set, with costumes and props signalling the move 'from street to interior or vice versa without a clearing of the stage'.<sup>41</sup> His remarks about conventions relating specifically to journeys are particularly helpful when considering the journeys implied in the York dialogue. As Dessen points out, conventions, then and now, do not necessarily require that the audience witness the journey itself. A journey can be signalled in any number of ways without being enacted literally. For the modern cinema audience, 'complex events ... require a selectivity in presentation' and 'the whole of a journey' can be signalled 'from seeing a figure get on a plane in one airport and get off in another'.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in Shakespearean texts, 'theatrical shorthand' in the form of specific reference in the dialogue to costume, such as 'boots and related apparel' makes the point that a journey has taken place or is about to take place.<sup>43</sup> On the analogy of such examples, it is possible that, on the medieval pageant wagon stage, journeys and other less extensive movements from place to place, were likewise expressed in a shorthand way. The medieval theatrical convention need not have required extensive movement around the wagon and the illusion of 'going' could have been achieved without using the street as additional playing space.

The lure of the street in twentieth-century conjectures about medieval playing can be related to an awareness of the confined space available on the wagon stages. In his recent commentary on the possible size of pageant wagons, John Marshall appears to favour the floor area of the wagons adapted for

'original-staging' productions in Leeds in 1975, ranging from 13' 6" x 6' 6" down to 11' 6" x 5', as approximating that of their purpose-built medieval counterparts.<sup>44</sup> This is, clearly, a constricted playing space, especially as some of the York pageants require a large number of actors to be on stage at any one time. The pageant stage for *The Last Judgement*, the episode sponsored by the Mercers, is one that we can consider in this context. The speaking parts of the text imply that for the Judgement sequence itself, the presence of two bad souls, two good souls, an angel, God, two apostles, and three devils is required. The directors of this pageant in the 1998 performances in Toronto and York did not elect to place all the actors on the wagon stage but would their medieval counterparts have done so? They may have been happy with what Marshall has suggested for *The Last Supper* pageant: 'a visual arrangement pleasingly reminiscent of medieval manuscript illuminations of the scene' that 'provided a framing of view that could be encompassed whole by the human eye at a moderate distance'.<sup>45</sup>

The Mercers' pageant wagon needs to represent heaven, earth, and hell simultaneously. Could all of this be confined to the space of the wagon? There is some evidence in the extant records from York that this may not always have been the case for, in 1463, the guild paid for a second pageant wagon from which the souls were to rise.<sup>46</sup> As the souls moved from the second wagon to the main wagon for judgement, they would, inevitably, have used the street. The 'helle mouthe'<sup>47</sup> listed in the 1433 pageant indenture poses a slightly different problem. It may have been set apart from the wagon, as it was in the Toronto 'original-staging' production of 1977,<sup>48</sup> or it could be attached to the wagon itself as in Meredith's suggested reconstruction.<sup>49</sup> Meredith's stage offers a compact vertical hierarchy of heaven, earth, and hell familiar from medieval iconography. The audience looking in on this stage picture could be impressed by the swift and decisive descent of the damned, but whether it was via a trap in the floor of the wagon or by way of the street remains a matter of conjecture.

Playing space for medieval productions has long been a concern in scholarly investigation of processional playing. One of the twentieth-century pioneers of the study of medieval stagecraft, Glynn Wickham, fitted out his reconstructed pageant wagon with an additional 'scaffold' stage to be placed in front of the main wagon.<sup>50</sup> David Jee, the artist commissioned by Thomas Sharp to provide the frontispiece for his 1825 *Dissertation*, pictured a wagon performance of the Coventry Smiths' pageant of *The Trial and Crucifixion of Christ* set in an expansive Tudor town square with a cleared area in front of the wagon.<sup>51</sup> There was ample room, in Jee's illustration, for playing on the street. This illustration, however, does not reflect the situation in the narrow streets of medieval York,

as a walk along what remains of the original pageant route today will demonstrate. Changes have taken place but Stonegate, in particular, remains approximately the same width as it was when the medieval pageants were performed there. By modern standards, and by the standards set by Jee's nineteenth-century reconstruction of Coventry, Stonegate is alarmingly narrow.

Another feature of the processional performance mode that should be taken into account is that each playing station offers the actors a unique performance space.<sup>52</sup> The medieval performers for whom this mode of presentation was traditional would not necessarily be constrained by the lowest common denominator of the variety of spaces available, but could have developed strategies to vary their performance from station to station to fit into whatever conditions they encountered. At larger playing stations, or at stations where small audiences had gathered, they may have incorporated more street-level playing as physical circumstances allowed. Actors and directors, like illustrators and scholars, can be creative in the matter of expanding the acting space to give room for whatever freedom of movement they require. Indeed, actors and directors in the 'original-staging' productions of the York pageants in Toronto and York in 1998 proved themselves adept in this regard. The paved roadway and adjacent ground-level spaces were annexed to the wagon stage in a number of the Toronto pageant performances. The *Christ and the Doctors in the Temple* pageant, for example, was distinguished by the 'anxious parents', Mary and Joseph, who literally 'search[ed] the audience for their lost son' while, in a separate action on the wagon, Jesus spoke with the Doctors.<sup>53</sup> The space available to the two actors in the expansive grassy quadrangle of Victoria College (station 2), in particular, facilitated the communication of their parental anxiety to members of the audience, who became their 'Jerusalem crowds and their friends and companions' as they circulated among them.

In the smaller scale, but equally impressive performance of eleven pageants in York City Centre a few weeks after the Toronto presentation, the actors, on a number of occasions, appropriated off-wagon space.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the most compelling example of the use of the road was in the Butchers' pageant of *The Death of Christ*. Much of the pageant was played at ground level and the street functioned as Pilate's court and the road to Calvary, with a ramp being used for the final ascent to the three crosses on the wagon (see fig 2). The physical bulk of the ramp and the movement of the actors through the audience effectively cleared the playing space and pushed the spectators back from the additional off-wagon area required by the scale of the production.



Fig 2. York, 1998, *The Death of Christ* (photo: Margaret Rogerson)

As in the Toronto *Christ and the Doctors* performance, the effect of using the street was to make the audience witness and party to the events being portrayed. A point to consider is that neither of the 1998 performances replicated precisely the limited space available at many of the original playing stations on the York pageant route. The spaciousness and openness of Toronto's playing stations allowed for and, indeed, invited the playing area to spill off the wagon onto the ground level. All of the playing stations in York in 1998 also allowed for more room for audience and actors than we can account for at the majority of the original stations.

In 1992 there was an 'original-staging' performance in York of five of the medieval pageants staged at five stations in Stonegate and Low Petergate on 20 and 21 June. This recreation of the processional wagon mode incorporated part of the original pageant route, and the first day of the performance, a very sunny Saturday, saw both Stonegate and Low Petergate choked with people who had come to see the plays, as well as other tourists, shoppers, and race-goers. This caused enormous congestion and reduced mobility. Consequently, there was concern for public safety and complaints from shopkeepers whose space had been invaded.<sup>55</sup> Since 1992 the original pageant route has been off-limits for wagon performances in York, although the authorities have approved other more spacious locations, that comply with safety regulations, in the city centre.

Although 'original-staging' productions can no longer use the narrow streets for performance stations, there is still room, and need, for experimentation with on-wagon performance of the kind that was attempted by Butterworth with *The Crucifixion* in 1992. While the soldiers of Twycross' *Resurrection* commandeered an area in the street for effective off-wagon playing in 1992, the soldier's of Butterworth's production restricted their activities to the wagon itself. Off-wagon playing for modern audiences has proven many times over that it has the capacity to involve the spectators by being on their level and moving among them. *The Crucifixion* experiment demonstrated, with memorable clarity for those who were there, that the converse is also true: actors can, indeed, achieve a high level of audience involvement without leaving the raised platform. The soldiers of this pageant concentrated their efforts on securing eye contact with the audience and this, combined with carefully choreographed movements on the wagon, allowed them to draw the spectators emotionally from the street-level and into the action. Props were passed between the actors in such a way as to implicate the audience. Collectively, and individually, the audience was involved in the handling of the instruments of the Passion through the stylized gestures of the actors and their direct address of dialogue associated with the props to the spectators. On the street watching or performing on the wagon, all humanity was part of this event. The Crucifixion itself was not viewed on a hill set apart at a distance, with the wagon as Calvary to be used only for the last moments of the performance. The wagon was both Calvary and a platform from which the soldiers could recruit individual members of the audience, and by implication, all the spectators, to assist them in their grisly task. The platform did not distance the actors, but it did give them a position of power that they exploited unmercifully through their hectoring direct address to make the audience complicit in their actions. The backdrop of the York shops and their signs – and for some members of the audience, the looming shape of the Minster – was more than enough to place the events into the present world. The actors of this pageant were not, literally, 'on' the street, but they were, most certainly, 'in' the street in the sense that their presence was closely connected to those who stood to watch, and to the living symbols of commerce and Christian spirituality visible behind and around them.

Before we assume that a literal 'raging in the street' was a widespread tradition accepted and expected by actors and audiences in York, we need to experience more on-wagon presentations of this quality and to explore the possibilities of approaches to theatrical representation that are not immediately familiar in our own time. Butterworth has continued his efforts in this regard



with his work on redefining 'exits' and 'entrances' for the medieval stage, which, he suggests, may not involve any more than moving in and out of 'focus'.<sup>56</sup> As Dessen and others have argued in relation to the stage aside in Shakespeare's theatre, a private speech could be signaled clearly by gesture or voice, and then accepted as being unheard by other characters on the stage even though they remained, literally, in close proximity to the speaker.<sup>57</sup> Such conventions could well have operated in the pageant-wagon theatre of medieval York. Were journeys signalled but not strictly enacted; and did characters who were not, strictly, operating in the same physical location, deliver their lines in close physical proximity to other actors on the wagon stage? If this was so, then the use of the street in York does not seem quite so compelling.

The medieval community was accustomed to viewing biblical events within the strictures of the leaded windows of religious buildings or the limits of the borders of manuscript miniature paintings. For them, the imagined transformation of the cramped confines of the wagon platform into the vastness of the Holy Land and the contemplation of their personal place in the scheme of salvation may well have been an automatic response to the living pictures confined on the pageant stage. While we cannot rule out the possibility of actors 'raging in the streets of medieval York' on some occasions, we should not be swayed to unqualified assumptions that the medieval players made consistent and extensive use of the additional playing area that was available on the roadway. We can envisage, with strong justification, that an effective form of 'raging in the streets' was achieved in medieval York without setting foot on the ground.

## Notes

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- 1 Hardin Craig (ed), *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 2nd ed, EETS ES 87 (Oxford, 1957), 27. All quotations from the Coventry pageants are from this edition. At the time of writing the new edition by Pamela M. King and Clifford Davidson, *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* (Kalamazoo, 2000) was not available.
- 2 R.W. Ingram, "'To find the players and all that longeth therto": Notes on the Production of Medieval Drama in Coventry', *The Elizabethan Theatre V*, G.R. Hibbard (ed) (Toronto, 1975), 29. For recent discussion of Crow and the fullest available description of his surviving holograph text, see Pamela King, *Coventry Mystery Plays*, Coventry and County Heritage Series Booklet 22 (Coventry, 1997), 45–50.

- 3 Peter Meredith used this term to describe modern productions influenced by medieval documentary evidence in 'Original-Staging Production of English Medieval Plays – Ideals, Evidence and Practice', *Popular Drama in Northern Europe in the Later Middle Ages: A Symposium*, Flemming G. Anderson, et al (eds) (Odense, 1988), 65–100. For general discussion of 'original-staging' see John Marshall, 'Modern Productions of Medieval English Plays', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, Richard Beadle (ed) (Cambridge, 1994), 290–311.
- 4 Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642* (Cambridge, 1999), viii.
- 5 Peter Happé, 'Acting the York Mystery Plays: A Consideration of Modes', *Medieval English Theatre* 10:2 (1988), 115.
- 6 Cami D. Agan, 'The Platea in the York and Wakefield Cycles: Avenues for Liminality and Salvation', *Studies in Philology* 94.3 (1997), 344–67; Olga Horner, "'Us Must Make Lies": Witness, Evidence and Proof in the York Resurrection', *Medieval English Theatre* 20 (1998), 24–76.
- 7 Agan, 'The Platea', 350.
- 8 Agan, 'The Platea', 364–7.
- 9 For an account of this production, see Meg Twycross, 'Playing "The Resurrection"', *Medieval Studies for J.A.W. Bennett*, P.L. Heyworth (ed) (Oxford, 1981), 273–96.
- 10 For an account of this production, see Philip Butterworth, 'The York Crucifixion: Actor/audience Relationship', *Medieval English Theatre* 14 (1992), 67–76.
- 11 Netta Syrett, *The Old Miracle Plays of England* (London, 1911), 85. Syrett (36) had 'Robert Crow' write out the pageant text for the Plasterers. For a discussion of this text, see David Mills, 'Netta Syrett and "The Old Miracle Plays of England"', *Medieval English Theatre* 10.2 (1988), 117–28.
- 12 Syrett, *The Old Miracle Plays*, 56, 59.
- 13 William Tydeman, *English Medieval Theatre 1400–1500* (London, 1986), 116.
- 14 Tydeman, *English Medieval Theatre*, 116.
- 15 A.C. Cawley, foreword to the facsimile edition of Sharp's 1825 publication, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries anciently performed at Coventry*, (Wakefield, 1973), vii–viii.
- 16 Sharp's first edition of 1817 was limited to twelve copies; his second edition of 1825 appears in the *Dissertation*, 83–124.
- 17 King, *Coventry Mystery Plays*, 48.
- 18 King, *Coventry Mystery Plays*, 49.

- 19 Larry D. Benson (ed), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed (Oxford, 1987), 1.3384. All quotations from *The Miller's Tale* are from this edition.
- 20 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Harold Jenkins (ed) (London, 1982), 3.2.2–14.
- 21 See, for example, J.O. Halliwell-Phillipps, *Illustrations of the Life of Shakespeare* (London, 1874), 48–9; and Clifford Davidson, “‘What hempen home-spuns have we swagg’ring here?’ Amateur Actors in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Coventry Civic Plays and Pageants”, *Shakespeare Studies* 19 (1987), 88. Peter Thomson notes Shakespeare’s possible acquaintance with Coventry’s Corpus Christi Play and Hock Tuesday play, *Shakespeare's Professional Career* (Cambridge, 1992), 11.
- 22 Thomas J. Derrick (ed), *Arte of Rhetorique by Thomas Wilson* (New York, 1982), 437–8.
- 23 King, *Coventry Mystery Plays*, 19, describes this Herod as an ‘exotic’ figure and draws attention to the evidence for the Herod of the lost Smiths’ pageant being provided with a ‘curved sword’. See R.W. Ingram (ed), *Coventry, Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto, 1981), 73, 200, for documentary references to the Smiths’ Herod’s curved sword.
- 24 Peter Meredith has made similar claims for the props used by the Chester Herod as ‘aspects of ... character and status’, in ‘Stage Directions and the Editing of Early English Drama’, *Editing Early English Drama: Special Problems and New Directions*, A.F. Johnston (ed) (New York, 1987), 83.
- 25 Dessen and Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions*, see under ‘stamp’, ‘stare’, ‘sword’, and ‘mad’, ‘distracted’, ‘raving’.
- 26 For ease of reference, the manuscripts in which the marginal notations appear have been treated collectively. Quotations are from R. M. Luminasky and David Mills (eds), *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, EETS ss 3 (Oxford, 1974).
- 27 David Mills, ‘The Stage Directions in the Manuscripts of the Chester Mystery Cycle’, *Medieval English Theatre* 3:1 (1981) 50; and Meredith, ‘Stage Directions’, 81–5.
- 28 Meredith, ‘Stage Directions’, 84.
- 29 *Arte of Rhetorique*, 33.
- 30 Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (eds), *York*, vol 1, *Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto, 1979), 109 (hereafter referred to as REED *York*). Tydeman defines these terms as ‘expertise, vocal calibre, and stage presence’; see “‘Agreeable to hys pageaunt’: Some Thoughts on Medieval Acting”, *Acting Medieval Plays*, Peter Meredith, William Tydeman, and Keith Ramsay (eds) (Lincoln, 1985), 38.
- 31 REED *York*, 25.
- 32 King, *Coventry Mystery Plays*, 10–11.

- 33 For a discussion of these and other differences between York and Coventry, see King, *Coventry Mystery Plays*, 4–6.
- 34 There is no proof that all of the recorded texts of the York play were ever performed in any one day; for discussion of evidence for variability in the number of pageants in the York Play, see Margaret Rogerson, 'A Table of Contents for the York Corpus Christi Play', *Words and Wordsmiths: A Volume for H.L. Rogers*, Geraldine Barnes, John Gunn, Sonya Jensen, and Lee Jobling (eds) (Sydney, 1989), 85–90; and Richard Beadle, 'The York Cycle: Texts, Performances, and the Bases for Critical Enquiry', *Medieval Literature: Texts and Interpretation*, Tim William Machan (ed) (New York and Birmingham, 1991), 118–19.
- 35 John Matthews Manly (ed), *Specimens of Pre-Shakespearean Drama*, vol. 2 (1897; rpt New York, 1967), 194.
- 36 Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (London, 1982), 85. All quotations from the York pageants are from this edition.
- 37 Gerald Byron Kinneavy, *A Concordance to The York Plays* (New York, 1986).
- 38 Beadle, *The York Plays*, 426.
- 39 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*, 2nd ed (London, 1965), 54, 94.
- 40 Alan C. Dessen, *Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge, 1995), 151.
- 41 Dessen, *Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Vocabulary*, 167.
- 42 Alan C. Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge, 1984), 11.
- 43 Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters*, 39.
- 44 Marshall, 'Modern Productions', 304.
- 45 Marshall, 'Modern Productions', 304–5.
- 46 REED *York*, 95.
- 47 REED *York*, 55.
- 48 For an account of this production, see Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The York Cycle: 1977', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 48.1 (1978), 1–9.
- 49 Peter Meredith, 'The Development of the York Mercers' Pageant Waggon', *Medieval English Theatre* 1:1 (1979), 14. This configuration was adopted in the York production in 1998.
- 50 Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660*, vol 1 (London, 1966), 173 and fig. 13. This reconstruction was influenced by Continental evidence and the Rogers' breviaries from Chester.
- 51 This illustration may also have been influenced by the Rogers' breviary of 1608–9 that had been 'obligingly communicated' to Sharp by J.H. Markland, who edited two of the Chester pageants in 1818 (*Dissertation*, 18).

- 52 For a discussion of the individual stations, see Eileen White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', *Medieval English Theatre* 9:1 (1987), 23–63.
- 53 Program notes, *The York Plays*, University of Toronto, 20 June 1998, Peter Meredith, director's notes for Play 20, *Christ and the Doctors*.
- 54 The York Mystery Plays 1998 was part of the York Early Music Festival, 3–12 July 1998. The pageants were sponsored by the guilds of York, with Jane Oakshott as artistic director.
- 55 Peter Meredith has suggested that this kind of congestion would not have occurred in the original performance conditions of medieval York in 'The Fifteenth-century Audience of the York Corpus Christi Play: Records and Speculation', *Divers toyes mengled': Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Culture in Honour of André Lascombes*, Michel Bitot, Roberta Mullini, and Peter Happé (eds) (Tours, 1996), 106.
- 56 Philip Butterworth, 'Comings and Goings: English Medieval Staging Conventions', *Early Drama, Art, and Music Review* 18:1 (1995), 25–34. Butterworth's work, like my own, has been influenced by Dessen's research.
- 57 Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters*, 9–10.