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Introduction

This double issue of *Early Theatre* was conceived as a way to mark a special academic and dramatic event that took place 19–20 June 1998 in Toronto. On June 20 the Poculi Ludique Societas (PLS), the medieval and Renaissance drama group associated with the Centre for Medieval Studies in the University of Toronto, coordinated a one-day production of the entire York Cycle in procession on wagons, using a text modernized by Kimberley Yates and Chester Scoville. This was, to my knowledge, the first complete outdoor processional performance since the sixteenth century. In 1977 PLS intended to perform the entire cycle over two days but torrential rain forced the production indoors for the plays from *Noah* to *The Road to Calvary*.¹ All other modern, outdoor, processional performances have been of selected episodes.

The performance element of the weekend's events is represented in this volume by a selection of Director's Notes from ten of the forty-eight directors who took part. Preceding the performance we held an academic symposium called 'The York Cycle Then and Now' in which invited speakers discussed four aspects of the performance of the York Cycle that have been debated in scholarly work and through modern performance for the last two decades. The four sessions of the Symposium were as follows:

1. 'Which is the front?' This session concentrated discussion on the configuration of the wagons. Were they conceived as *ommegang* wagons or wagons built for continental civic processions with *tableaux vivants* and so configured 'end-on' or were they conceived as movable 'booth' stages and so configured 'side-on'? Meg Twycross of the University of Lancaster, John McKinnell of the University of Durham, both advocates of the 'end-on' configuration, presented papers that were answered by a defence of 'side-on' from Douglas Hayes of the University of Toronto.

2. 'In the pagond and in the strete also.' Taking its title from a famous stage direction in the Coventry Shearmen and Taylors Play, this session addressed the issue of how much the action should be confined to the wagon

itself. Margaret Rogerson of the University of Sydney gave a paper from a historical perspective that was followed by two papers of a more practical nature from two academic directors, Martin Walsh of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and Ralph Blasting of Towson State University.

3. The third session, 'Hearing and seeing', introduced the surviving space in York and considered how much we can extrapolate about the nature, size, and acoustics of the playing places for which the play was written. Eileen White, a private scholar from Yorkshire and the acknowledged expert on the actual physical locations used for the cycle, led off this session to be followed by two papers from Pamela King of St Martin's College, Lancaster, and Charles Costello of the University of Toronto, who focused their papers on audience response.

4. The fourth session, "'Saie me nowe somewhat": language and prosody', explored the nature of the text of the cycle itself as it was honed over a century of performance. A paper by Richard Beadle, the most recent editor of the York Cycle, was followed by a paper centred on prosody by Elza Tiner of Lynchburg College, Virginia, and one on thematic centrality of language in the cycle by myself.

The 'academic day' concluded with a public lecture given by Peter Meredith of the University of Leeds, a senior medieval drama scholar and a pioneer performer of early drama. Professor Meredith's paper was designed to 'introduce' audience members and many of the performers in the following day's production to the cycle and the city that produced it, providing a bridge between an academic consideration of the York Cycle and its public performance.

The papers included in this volume are not the papers that were given on that day. Rather, they are a selection representing the thrust of the arguments. They have changed from the original conference papers into more complex reflective pieces growing from the exchange of ideas during the symposium, the performance in Toronto, and, for some, the performance in York of fourteen pageants (coordinated by Jane Oakshott) in July 1998. They have also been greatly strengthened by a time for reflection on the whole experience and the process of peer review. Although these papers differ radically from the more speculative discussion papers given at the symposium, the symposium title, 'The York Cycle Then and Now' has subtly influenced the revised papers. Each paper has evolved with a double vision reflecting the 'then' of the York Cycle in the period from 1376/7 to 1569 and the 'now' of the York Cycle as it was experienced in 1998 and in other modern reproductions since 1951, especially the 1992 processional performance along part of the original pageant route in York coordinated by Meg Twycross.

The collection begins with a paper by Peter Meredith that functions within this volume in a manner similar to his paper at the symposium. The papers that follow presuppose a thorough knowledge of late medieval York and the complex history of the processional play performed at Corpus Christi by the craft guilds under the control of the city council. Meredith's paper sets the frame for the rest of the collection, placing the York Cycle in the context of its city and the didactic literature of the late medieval period. It provides a careful outline of the historic production details and cautions us to be aware of what we do know for certain and what must remain open for speculation – our 'best guesses' based on the fragmentary nature of the evidence.

The second paper, Eileen White's 'Places to Hear the Play in York', addresses the issue of the peculiar processional method chosen by the organizers of the play and then takes the reader through the route, station by station, providing through her research and her many illustrations a palimpsest of the route through the streets of York as they were then and as they are now. Her paper ends with a discussion of the consequences of her study of the route on the issue of the configuration of the wagons. This question is taken up in the third paper – John McKinnell's rich reflection on the work of Meg Twycross on the Continental analogues and his own experiences as a practitioner. He draws on his experience of wagon performance in Durham and York and a consideration of several of the pageants in Toronto. He offers the warning that we cannot extrapolate much about the original dynamics of York wagon performance unless the conditions reflect the size and nature of the original stations. His study leads him to propose a new theory for the nature of the wagons, suggesting that many were over twenty feet high. Interestingly, this idea of a height greater than we have hitherto assumed is also addressed by Martin Walsh as he struggles with the whole issue of how much could be performed on the wagon. McKinnell's essay provides another useful concept as he suggests that the most successful wagons are, like the *ommegang* wagons of Leuven, 'transpicuous' or open so that the action can be seen equally well from each side.

Margaret Rogerson's paper opens up the discussion of the use of the street using evidence from Coventry and, to a lesser degree, from Chester, to suggest that we should be cautious about playing off the wagon. She finds little hard historical confirmation of such a practice. She concludes her argument with a description of the 1992 production in York where Phillip Butterworth's Bretton Hall production of *The Crucifixion*, played on the wagon rather than on the street, had an enormous impact in its original setting. Ralph Blasting's paper, based on a close reading of the text of the cycle, comes to much the same conclusion while Martin Walsh, who struggled with the direction of two

episodes in the 1998 production, *Abraham and Isaac* and *The Dream of Pilate's Wife* (*The First Trial before Pilate*), is led conversely to consider how often the text calls for action, however brief, off the wagon. He also argues, unwittingly following McKinnell's suggestion of greater height for the wagons, that 'high places' are significant dramatic locations in these plays. His discussion of the 'threshold' action in many of the trial plays is particularly interesting.

These papers concerned with the use of the wagons and the street are followed by an essay by Pamela King centred on audience response, raising the important questions of how the understandings and expectations of a modern audience differ from a medieval one. She argues that most modern audience members do not bring to the plays the familiarity with Christian icon or language that must have enriched the experience of the original audiences. But lest we all become too solemn in our consideration of the response of a medieval audience, King concludes with an imagined vignette from the fifteenth century where two York matrons consider *The Crucifixion* as they hurry home from their shopping. The last two papers, those by Richard Beadle and myself, shift the focus away from action to language. Yet, as both papers demonstrate, in the York Cycle, language is action.

The York Cycle is paradoxically the best known of the four English 'cycles' and the least studied in the classroom. Believed lost until the third quarter of the nineteenth century, its first editor, Lucy Toulmin Smith, chose not to publish with the Early English Text Society, through which all the other texts of early drama have been edited and recently re-edited. When Richard Beadle undertook a new edition of the York text in 1982 he, too, chose a commercial press. Almost without exception, academic libraries in the English-speaking world subscribe to the Early English Text Society. Not all libraries chose to buy these unconnected texts. As a result, the full scholarly text of the York Cycle has never been universally available and in recent years both editions have been out of print. While this situation will soon be rectified by the publication of Beadle's text through the EETS, it is against this publication history that the study of the York Cycle has been conducted over the last century. Furthermore, the highly fragmentary nature of the cycle that tells the story of salvation history with more than twice as many episodes as the Chester Cycle, has made it hard to anthologize. Only the Crucifixion pageant is readily available for undergraduate students. And yet this is the cycle that has been most performed in recent years. E. Martin Browne's courageous choice of this play for York's contribution to the Festival of Britain in 1951 led to a regular sequence of performances in the ruins of St Mary's Abbey for several decades. Indeed, this version of the play, based on the modernization of the text prepared by

Canon J.S. Purvis, is considered by many modern-day citizens of York to be the 'traditional' form of the play. They do not know the full processional medieval text. Of all the medieval plays, only the York Cycle has been adapted for the public stage in Tony Harrison's famous *The Mysteries* twenty years ago, where God appeared in a fork lift. And, although all four biblical sequences have been performed over the last half century, the York Cycle has been the most frequent choice of modern directors. It is our hope that this volume of essays and Directors' notes will encourage not only the continued performance of this magnificent dramatic legacy from the late Middle Ages but also a more intense academic study of the play in its social and literary context.

Notes

- 1 See five reviews of the 1977 production in *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 20 (1977), 107–22; Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The York Cycle, 1977', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 48.1 (1978), 1–9 ; and David Parry, 'The York Mystery Cycle in Toronto, 1977', *Medieval English Theatre* 1 (1979), 19–31.