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## **The Medieval Pageant Wagons at York: Their Orientation and Height<sup>1</sup>**

### **The Evidence**

Modern perceptions of the staging of cycle drama in medieval England are inevitably based largely on comparative evidence derived from other media and traditions. The surviving scripts were usually copied for the benefit either of actors and producers or of the controlling civil authorities; the former were well-versed in their inherited traditions of performance, while the interest of the latter was limited to the maintenance of good order, competent and speedy performance, and adherence to a previously vetted script. Neither group needed explanations of details of staging. Contemporary visual depictions of English cycle plays are entirely lacking, so a modern director who wishes to visualize how his or her play might have looked in a late-medieval production is forced to consult other types of source. These may include civic records, illustrations of biblical scenes in graphic art, comparable dramatic or quasi-dramatic traditions from elsewhere in Europe, and the experience gained from practical attempts to reconstruct pageant wagons and their play episodes in modern productions.

It may be useful to begin with a few basic criteria which I shall use in evaluating these sources.

1. We must be on our guard against the influence of unconscious assumptions drawn from later theatrical traditions or external circumstances. This applies not only to questions of emotional, psychological, and ideological impact on the audience, with which I shall not be concerned in this paper, but also to the physical layout of the wagons themselves. However, where a modern producer encounters a physical or practical problem, the same conditions are likely to have been encountered in late medieval productions; were they also perceived as problems then?

2. The most informative modern productions (from a purely historical point of view) are likely to be those which have used original performance

stations at York (though only in places where the street geography remains as it was in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), or where the physical surroundings are as similar to those at York as possible. Thus, York performances in Stonegate, at Minster Gates, and in Petergate are likely to be more informative than those in King's Square or St Samson's Square, which did not then exist; and the most useful locations elsewhere are likely to be those which approximate most closely to a medieval street.

3. 'Unsuccessful' details in modern productions are usually more informative than 'successful' ones. If some aspect of a production is found to cause practical problems, we must first consider whether it would have seemed similarly unsatisfactory in the late Middle Ages; if so, we can conclude that experienced medieval directors are unlikely to have done it in this way. 'Successful' details provide less certain evidence, for there may be more than one method of achieving an effect successfully; they merely enable us to say: 'This is one way in which they might have done it'. For this reason, this article will allude to a number of modern 'mistakes', some of them in my own productions; I apologize to the other directors concerned for my references to their less glorious moments – we all learn from our mistakes.

4. 'Success' and its opposite cannot be completely assessed by modern standards of visibility, audibility, or audience comfort. However, it makes obvious sense to assume that productions which could be clearly seen and heard were always preferred (and especially that people who paid for special seats or saw the Play from privileged positions because of their rank expected a good view).<sup>2</sup> The need to maintain public order was a basic civic concern, and would certainly have prompted the city council to forbid any practice which was perceived to be physically dangerous (for example, if a wagon had been obviously unstable or audience congestion became such as to threaten casualties); they did, in fact, take measures against any disorder and in time of plague.<sup>3</sup>

5. Some performance stations were used more often than others, either because they were easier to rent out or because the city council had stipulated a limited number of stations for performance. Stations which were used regularly were probably regarded as more successful than those which were used only rarely; and modern productions which fail to accommodate the demands of these popular spaces are therefore unlikely to reflect medieval practice.

Until the mid 1980s, most twentieth-century cycle-play producers assumed that performances were side-on – that is to say, that the long side of the wagon represented the front of the 'stage'.<sup>4</sup> There is actually no historical evidence in favour of this, unless we regard the wagon as a moving version of a booth-stage

and adduce illustrations like those in Breughel's 'La Kermesse' (c 1550)<sup>5</sup> or William Boonen's illustration of a *Judgement of Solomon* play at Leuven (1594).<sup>6</sup> However, both of these are very doubtful parallels: neither stage is apparently mounted on a wagon (the stage supports in Breughel's painting are hidden by the audience, while the Leuven stage is unambiguously on trestles); neither depicts an episode found in any English cycle; and both reflect the activities of acting companies very different from the English craft guilds (probably travelling professional actors in the Breughel painting, certainly a company of *rederijckers* – rhetoricians – in Boonen's drawing). Most producers have adopted this method of staging simply because it seemed the obvious way to use the wagon. I think there are three main reasons for this.

1. It is the shape which corresponds most closely to the wide proscenium arch of traditional modern theatres, and it allows the actors the maximum possible lateral space, and thus minimizes masking problems. This assumption can already be seen in David Jee's frontispiece engraving to Sharp, *Dissertation* (1825), which gives a lively side-on view of Christ before Pilate at Coventry (see fig 1), and has been so influential that its decorative crenellations were faithfully reproduced on the frame of the *Balaam and Balaak* wagon used in the Durham Medieval Theatre Co production at Chester in 1983.<sup>7</sup> But although some details of this are based on Archdeacon Rogers' account of the Chester pageants, the side-on orientation is mere assumption, whether by Jee or Sharp.<sup>8</sup>

2. Modern reconstructive outdoor productions are usually presented in open spaces which encourage a wide playing area, either because they have access to such locations as university campuses, or because of police concerns about crowd safety. Of the four stations used at Toronto in 1998, only one (station 3, between Burwash Hall and Rowell-Jackman Hall) roughly approximated to a wide medieval street; when they reached this station, side-playing wagons had to manoeuvre into a position equivalent to parking across the street. Similarly, police concerns about audience safety led the York productions of 1994 and 1998 to reject the traditional medieval stations, which had been used in 1988 and 1992, in favour of the wider spaces of St Samson's Square and King's Square, neither of which existed in the fifteenth century.

3. Late medieval art is not usually concerned with problems of perspective, and it therefore tends to present a two-dimensional appearance. Productions inspired by manuscript art may present intensely beautiful sets (the 1995 PLS production of the York *Visitation* is a good example, see fig 2), and because the models behind them are two-dimensional, a shallow stage seems appropriate for their conception.

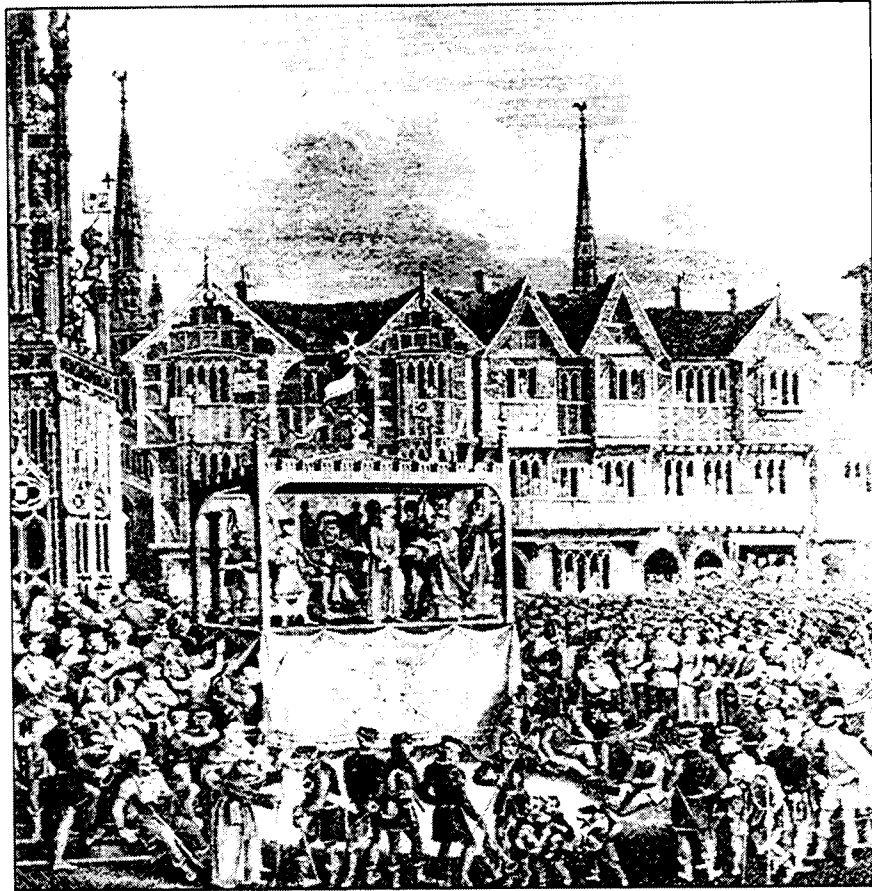


Fig 1. Christ before Pilate at Coventry, as imagined by David Jee in Thomas Sharp, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries anciently performed at Coventry*, 1825.

Of these three causes, the first two represent modern influences which we should ignore when we consider possible modes of performance in York in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The third is more seductive but equally misleading; a set based on manuscript miniatures may look stunningly beautiful and convincingly 'medieval' when seen from one side, but because it is derived from a two-dimensional image, it rarely looks impressive in procession, and many members of the audience will come on it from the wrong side or from one of the ends, and thus have a predominant impression of looking at the back of a modern stage set.

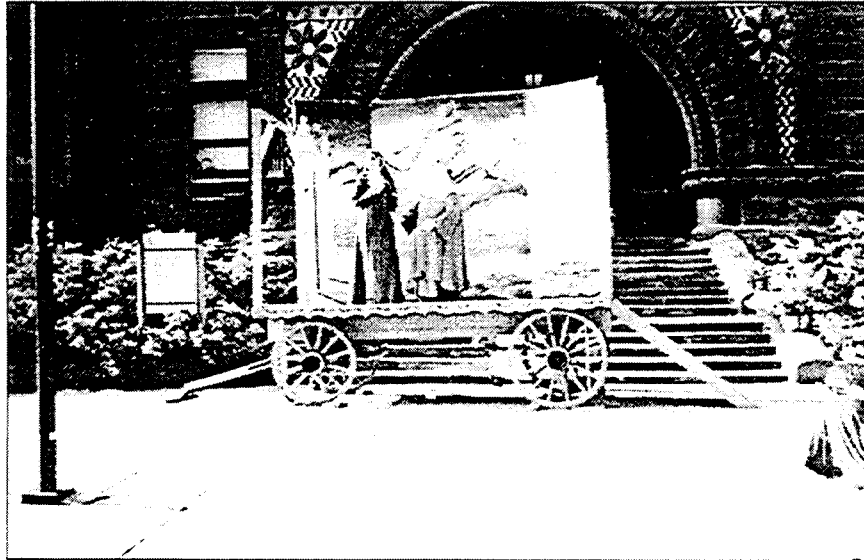


Fig 2. PLS, The York *Visitation* at Toronto, 1995 (photo: John McKinnell)

Here we may make cautious comparison with a number of Continental traditions which, while not fully dramatic, also involve processions with wagons presenting biblical scenes, often in cycle form and sometimes celebrating the feast of Corpus Christi. The most important of these are the illustrations of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Flemish *ommegangen*,<sup>9</sup> in Antwerp, Brussels, and Leuven (of which a descendant which survives today is the celebration of the Holy Blood at Bruges); some of the wagons depicted in these drawings are known to have been built in the fifteenth century. Interesting parallels may also be drawn with Spanish and Catalan wagon-borne pageants such as those still to be seen at Valencia,<sup>10</sup> some of whose wagons were built in the sixteenth century. These traditions all originate from the same period as the York Cycle, serve a similar religious and quasi-dramatic function, and are presented in cities by lay organizations.

The orientation found in these pageant traditions is common to all of them and consistently different from the 'side-on' pageants that have been imagined for York by most modern producers (see for example the Leuven pageant of the *Assumption of the Virgin*, fig 3). These wagons are usually designed either as street architecture, three-dimensional and intended to look impressive from all four sides, or as an open space;<sup>11</sup> even at their most architectural, they are usually transpicious (ie, the structure is open, supported on

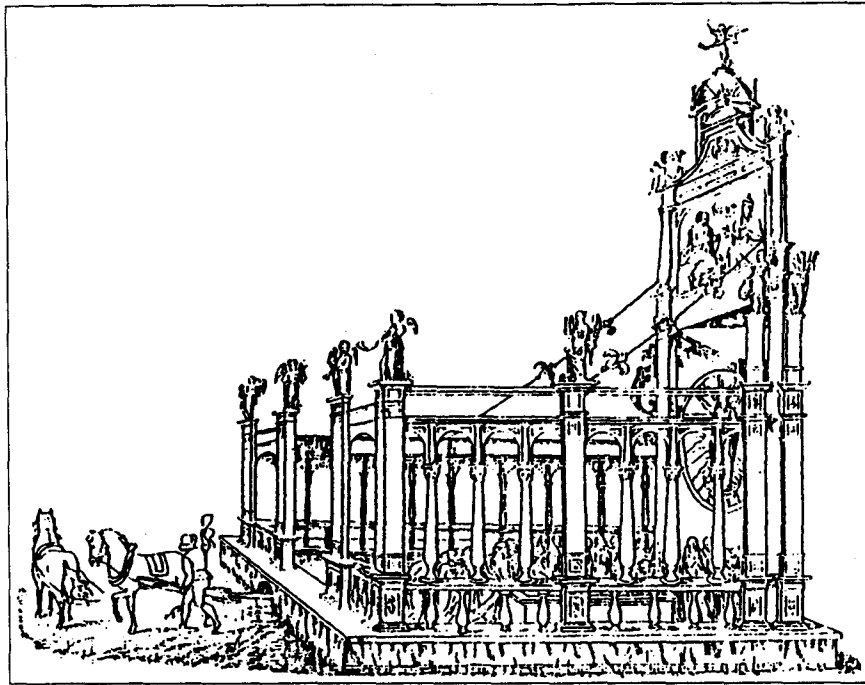


Fig 3. *Assumption of the Virgin*, Leuven *ommegang* wagon (Museum van der Kelen-Mertens, Leuven)

pillars so that the actors can be seen almost equally well from all sides). At most, they have a backdrop, and the set then seems designed to be seen from three sides, with the fourth used as 'backstage' for the actors. They often have no 'stage front' at all, but where they have one, the front of the wagon is usually the 'front' of the stage. In the Brussels pageant of the Annunciation in the painting by Denis van Alsloot of *The Triumph of Isabella*,<sup>12</sup> the back of the wagon is clearly the stage front. The same seems to be true of the wagon carrying the Adoration of the Shepherds in the same painting, but here there are also other figures. What seems to be the Adoration of the Magi is shown as facing the right side, and the half-hidden front corner accommodates a man wielding a mallet to drive in a large spike, in a pose which suggests one of the crucifiers of Christ. Perhaps each of the four sides of this pageant contained a different tableau of the life of Christ, with the Nailing to the Cross at the front and another scene (the Resurrection?) on the hidden left side. Apart from this exceptional case, I have not seen any illustrations of *ommegang* wagons in which one side of the wagon is presented as the front of a scene.

I shall argue that these other European traditions present a more useful model for wagon-play sets than the images of manuscript art or early frescoes and paintings. The *ommegang* illustrations show practical late-medieval and early-Renaissance responses to the problems of processional dramatic or quasi-dramatic staging in the street; and there are also reasons to think that the all-round or end-on stages depicted in them would have worked better in the streets of medieval York than the side-on sets with which we are so familiar. In the discussion which follows, I shall use the term 'pageant' to describe the whole spectacle presented by a single guild, including the appearance of their 'wagon' (the physical structure with the various additional objects which combined to make up what we would now call its 'set') and its impact in procession as well as their 'play' (the corresponding scripted episode preserved in the manuscript of the York Register). The whole cycle is sometimes referred to as 'the Play'.

### The Street Dynamics of Medieval York

Many of the streets of medieval York were very narrow – sometimes as little as twenty-one feet between buildings at ground level (see Appendix),<sup>13</sup> and less than this at higher levels because of the overhanging 'jetties' of upper floors. Many wagons must certainly have been too high to pass under the first-floor jetties, and it would therefore be impossible to place them hard against the wall on one side of the street; in any case, a side-playing wagon needs a 'backstage' space for the actors. If this were limited to a practical minimum of three feet in width and the wagon was a modest six feet wide, it would be necessary to subtract *at least* nine feet from the width of the street in estimating the depth of space available for the audience. Even this assumes that there is no space at all between the 'stage front' side of the wagon and the front of the audience, and that there are no steps from the wagon to the street (which might reduce the audience space by about another four feet). When the street is too narrow, a large proportion of the audience of a side-playing pageant is forced out sideways, where their view of the 'stage front' side rapidly becomes so oblique as to be virtually useless.

Where the performance faced a street corner this may not have mattered (but see below), but at stations where there was no road junction it could sometimes cause serious problems of congestion. The largest number of stations known for any year's performance at York is the seventeen listed for 1569 (see Appendix), though it is not certain that all of them were actually used.<sup>14</sup> Of these, eight are not at street junctions, while a ninth (no 7) has a street junction opposite the stationholder (the person who paid the city council to lease the station, and who is named when the station is specified by them), which cannot have been used

as audience space by any side-oriented wagon which faced the stationholder's property.

Of these nine stations, nos 1, 3, 16, and 17 would be wide enough to accommodate a (fairly small) audience, but nos 5, 7, 8, 10, and 12 would leave spaces for audience depth of, *at most*, 14–18 feet, 14 feet, 24 feet, 16 feet, and 19 feet. Yet nos 7, 8, and 10 also appear in the list of stations for 1399, and nos 7, 8, 10, and 12 in the list for 1551; these were traditional stations and had clearly not been found to be impractical. They must have been used in a way that could accommodate the audience (as would naturally happen when a wagon played end-on or all-round and the audience could fill up as much of the length of the street as was needed).

It is often assumed that no such problems could occur where performance faced a street junction, but experience at Little Stonegate in 1992 showed that there could still be serious problems for a side-playing wagon if the facing alley was too narrow. Here the Lords of Misrule performed immediately opposite Little Stonegate on a right-facing wagon, which allowed part of the audience to move back into Little Stonegate. However, the further back one goes into this alley, the narrower and more 'blinkered' this view becomes; and the congestion was still serious enough to cause some police anxiety for the safety of the audience.

The records for 1551 present an interesting case of reduction of the numbers of pageants and playing places because of an outbreak of plague;<sup>15</sup> in this year the city council decreed that there should be only ten pageants (unnamed) and ten stations (which are specified). Interestingly, the stations not used in 1551 include two of the three where there was most space (Nos 1, Holy Trinity Gates, and 16 or 17, one of the two stations on the Pavement). White suggests that this was 'on the assumption that fewer places meant fewer people would see the Play rather than that more people would attempt to crowd around the fewer places', and notes that the places discarded were 'mostly at corners or wider streets where a larger audience could have congregated'.<sup>16</sup> She suggests that this may have been intended as a way of discouraging large audiences – but it is equally possible that the council expected fewer people than usual to risk seeing the Play and consequently nominated only the 'best' stations. In that case, it may seem that a wide street was actually regarded as less favourable for performance than a narrow one.

### **Left or Right?**

Any side-on wagon production has to decide whether to play to the left or to the right, and must play to the same side at all stations. The 1998 route at



Toronto imposed a heavy pressure to play to the left: the steps of Old Vic to the left of station 1 and the grass adjoining Charles St West to the left of station 4 compelled most or all of the audience to sit or stand on that side, and there was also more space to the left at station 2 (in front of Burwash Hall arch). It is therefore not surprising that most producers chose to play to the left; I saw none which played to the right or the front, and only three (*The Temptation of Christ*, *The Crucifixion*, and *The Ascension*) which played to the rear.

Some recent scholars have suggested that the original wagons at York also played to the left,<sup>17</sup> but this has usually been within the assumption that performance had to be to one side or the other, and in fact there are problems whichever side is chosen. A procession of left-playing pageants would probably have shown the backstage side of their wagons to the 1569 stationholder at stations 8, 10, and 13. As the named men at stations 8 and 10 were both innkeepers, who would gain income from a performance which faced their inns but not from one which turned its back on them, this is a significant difficulty; if stationholders elsewhere were able to erect scaffolds for seating, for which they could then charge, the same consideration would also apply to them.

The problems faced by pageants which played to the right in 1569 would have been even more serious. In this case, the players would certainly have turned their backstage side towards stationholders at stations 2, 7, 9, 12, and 15, and probably also at stations 3 and 14. The stationholders at stations 2, 3, and 14 were again innkeepers, while the audience at station 9 included the Lord Mayor and council (watching from the chamber above the Common Hall); at station 11 the plays were seen by the dean and chapter, presumably from the room above the Minster Gates,<sup>18</sup> which would have been awkwardly placed to extreme stage left of a production that played to the right; and at station 15 the audience would include the Lord Mayor's family and household. The idea that the players would turn their back on the Lord Mayor rather than playing towards him can be ruled out.<sup>19</sup>

Performance at street corners where there is a sharp change of direction in the route also presents problems for side-on productions. The difficulties are not serious when the direction of turn is away from the 'front stage' side, for this enables the wagon to be placed half-way round the corner, with its back to the point of the corner. The audience would then tend to fill up the mouth of the street or streets opposite, with a diagonal front view of the stage, though one would see progressively less of the wagon as one got further from the corner. The real problem would occur when the direction of turn was towards stage front, since here the effect of the corner would be to divide the audience into two separate halves. This would happen to a left-facing wagon

at station 6, the sharp left turn at Ousegate head, where Ousegate was only twenty-one feet wide, and its audience could use only the streets on the pageant route (Ousegate and Spurriergate), but not High Ousegate or Nessgate, which would be 'backstage'.

White suggests two possible ways of getting round this difficulty, but both involve turning the wagon at least forty-five degrees against the natural direction of the turn (so that each wagon would then have to add this movement to the already tight turn before it could continue to the next station).<sup>20</sup> On a narrow and muddy corner this would represent a laborious manoeuvre even if the wagons had steering pins (a point which is not generally agreed, though I think that they probably could steer round corners).<sup>21</sup> A right-facing wagon would have no serious problems at Ousegate corner, but would probably be faced with insuperable difficulties by the right turns at stations 9 (Common Hall Gates) and 11 (Minster Gates), before (or with its back to) what were arguably the two most important audiences of the day. This consideration suggests that production using right-facing wagons would have been impossible, while use of left-facing wagons seems unlikely.

### Playing in Stonegate

One of the most interesting stations for the modern producer is in Stonegate, whose layout today remains as it was in the fifteenth century except that the jetties have been removed or reduced. Its junction with Little Stonegate (which in the Middle Ages was called Swinegate) is specified in the plans for Henry VII's state visit to York in July–August 1486 as the place where the Woollen Weavers, who presented *The Assumption of the Virgin* in the cycle, were to greet the king with a pageant of the Virgin,<sup>22</sup> and it is clear from the fact that she descends from 'heaven' and from the scattering of wafers 'in maner of Snaw' that it was intended that they should use their two-storey pageant wagon for this spectacle.

Stonegate becomes about five feet wider at the Swinegate junction than it is up to that point, and it would have been possible to park a left-facing wagon in the set-back in front of Swinegate; however, the projecting jetties at first-floor level would now force the backstage side of the wagon about two feet out from the line of the buildings, and they probably had a larger overhang in the fifteenth century than today. If the wagon was a modest six feet wide (and it may have been wider), it would have projected at least three feet beyond the corner of the set-back, leaving the royal procession to squeeze through a gap no wider than seventeen feet (perhaps less), and forcing the king to look at the wagon so close up that he could hardly have received a very good view of it as a whole.

It would make better sense to back the wagon into Swinegate, thus allowing the royal procession the full width of the street and giving the king a better, if sudden view of the Woollen Weavers' tableau. But Swinegate is only fifteen feet wide at ground level and about twelve feet at first floor level (and the jetty on one side of it has since been removed, so that it would then have been narrower at first floor level). It would almost certainly have been impossible to place a wagon side-on across Swinegate; and if it was to be backed into Swinegate, the spectacle it presented must have been designed to be seen end-on.

In the event, we know from the Progress of Henry VII that this tableau was moved to Ousegate corner, where it would present a more effective spectacle as the king approached it up Ousegate.<sup>23</sup> Here it would have to be in the mouth of High Ousegate to provide room for the royal procession to swing past it on the corner into Spurriergate. It would probably be possible to place a left-sided wagon across High Ousegate, facing in the opposite direction to the normal pageant route, but it would be easier and more natural to back an end-facing pageant into High Ousegate or to bring it down High Ousegate from the 'parking space' on the Pavement.

Four of the five plays performed in York in 1992 played at the junction of Stonegate with Little Stonegate. The Lords of Misrule's *Death and Burial of Christ* used a right-facing wagon, which forced much of the tightly-packed audience out to the sides or into Little Stonegate; my own attempt to see this play, coming from further back along the processional route through the narrow section of Stonegate, was almost totally unsuccessful (see fig 4, which represents the best view I was able to get).

The Joculatores Lancastrienses production of *The Resurrection* played off the front of the wagon with the majority of its audience in front of it along Stonegate, but some edging round to the stage right side, towards and into Little Stonegate;<sup>24</sup> because the set was transpicuous, this worked well, though that part of the audience must have had a restricted view of the soldiers when they were at ground level.

The Bretton Hall *Crucifixion* and the Groningen *Hortulanus*, both productions of plays which need no elaborate machinery, used open wagons, with no set at all in the first case and only delicate suggestions of a garden in the second. For these plays the audience gathered all round the wagons and the actors played very successfully to all four sides.

The remaining pageant, the Durham *Harrowing of Hell*, played off the back of the wagon and thus came through the audience before playing back towards the junction with Little Stonegate from about twenty yards further on. This position corresponds almost exactly with the probable location of Christopher

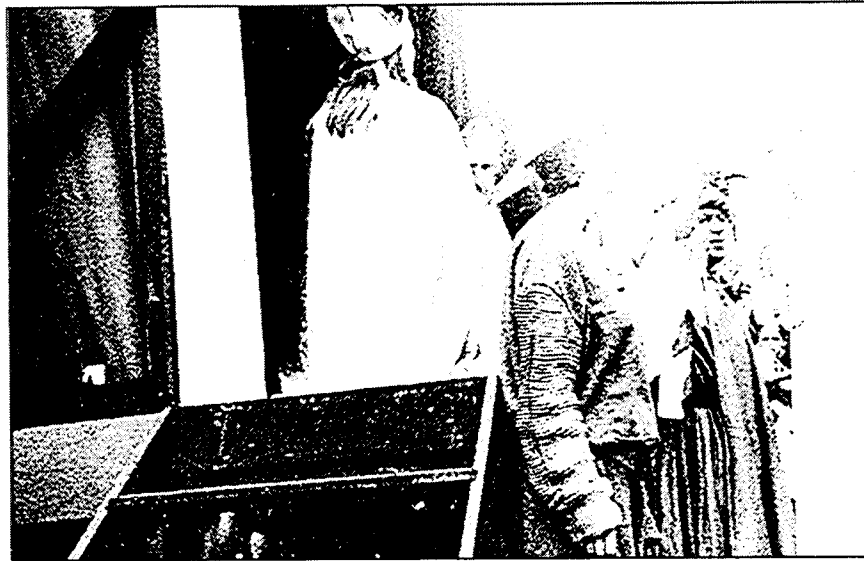


Fig 4. York Lords of Misrule, *The York Death and Burial of Christ* at Stonegate, York, 1992 (photo: John McKinnell)

Willoughby's house (station 10 in 1569).<sup>25</sup> Since this tower-like pageant had to accommodate a barred limbo and an enclosed hell, it could not be transpicuous; most of its action was played on an open downstage area or at the front of limbo, where the actors could be seen from three sides. Most of its audience gathered behind the wagon in the space back to the junction with Little Stonegate, but some were very close to the sides of the wagon. This orientation also seemed to work, and it had the interesting and unforeseen effect that the set-back of the street-line at Little Stonegate created a partial enclosure of the back of the audience on the stage left side, giving the actors a useful facing wall to bounce their voices off, thus matching the only real advantage enjoyed by street performances of side-facing productions.

A similar effect was also experienced playing back towards Minster Gates, where there is a similar projecting building line (this time from the right), though whether this would have been present when the structure of the Minster Gate itself was standing I do not know. A lesser version of the same 'enclosure' effect was also created by the curve of Petergate just before Grape Lane; and again, the natural point from which to play back towards Grape Lane coincided almost exactly with the position of 'Mr. Birnand's house', station 12 in 1569.<sup>26</sup> A rear-oriented performance would also have the advantage of playing directly back towards the Common Hall and the mayor

at station 9, and towards St Crux Church at station 16 (though a front-facing one would enjoy the same advantage playing towards Christ Church at station 13 (Goodramgate corner) and towards All Saints Church at station 17). This suggests the possibility (though it falls far short of proof) that the York plays may have been played either all round (when the set was open or completely transpicious) or off the rear of the wagon (when it was not).

### **How high were the pageant wagon sets?**

Most modern wagon sets have been wide but fairly low, and again this has been strongly influenced by modern conditions, for pageant routes in modern cities are usually afflicted with overhead wires. In the case of Toronto, whose reconstructions have been extremely influential, there is also the Burwash Hall arch (between stations 2 and 3 on the 1998 route), which requires any set higher than twelve feet above ground level to be dismantled before it will go through. But the processional route taken in York did not go through any of the city gates, and even the storage houses on Toft Green (then known as Pageant Green) were within the walls of the city; and the pageant wagons were purpose-built and used for nothing else. What evidence can we collect about the probable height of the pageant 'sets' at York?<sup>27</sup>

The modern producer typically begins with a fairly low-platformed wagon, often adapted from farm uses such as haymaking, where a low deck saves effort; it is laborious and expensive to raise the height of a wagon-deck significantly, and so we usually work with the height which chance delivers to us. Thus the wagon on which the *Temptation* and *Ascension* pageants were presented in Toronto in 1998 had a deck about three feet from the ground; the traditional delivery wagon we use in Durham, with a deck height of four feet, is relatively high. Only one wagon used at Toronto in 1998 (the one on which *The Fall of Man* was played) was significantly higher than this, and it had been given its raised deck by PLS as an academic experiment – one which I found very effective, though I would have liked to see it adorned with more sumptuous wagon skirts.

The decks of most medieval pageant wagons were probably higher than those we are used to today. According to Archdeacon Rogers, the 'lower rowme' of the Chester wagons (presumably under the deck) was high enough for the actors to use it as a changing room, which implies a height of five to six feet.<sup>28</sup> A similar height is implied in van Alsloot's painting of the *ommegang* wagons at Brussels in his *Triumph of Isabella*,<sup>29</sup> and some Spanish wagons emphatically confirm this. The basic structure of the Valencia wagons, some of which date



Fig 5. Durham Medieval Theatre Co, The York *Assumption of the Virgin* at Minster Gates, York, 1988 (photo: Rick Tersmette)



Fig 6. Durham Medieval Theatre Co, The York *Last Judgement* at Odense Cathedral, 1998: Deus welcomes the Good Souls (photo: Meg Twycross)

from the first half of the sixteenth century, is surmounted by elaborate carriagework which results in a deck height of about six feet;<sup>30</sup> and at Valladolid jacking mechanisms are used to raise the decks to a similar height.<sup>31</sup> I do not know of any countervailing evidence to suggest that wagon decks at York were significantly lower than this.

The more elaborate York plays require two acting decks, representing 'earth' and 'heaven'. The Durham production of *The Assumption* (York 1988) had a height of seven feet between 'earth' and 'heaven', but we found this to be too low; the shadows immediately under the floor of 'heaven' cast the faces of actors on 'earth' into deep gloom (see fig 5). Raising the height to about eight feet (eg, in *Last Judgement* productions by Jocalatores Lancastrienses, 1988, and Durham Medieval Theatre Co, 1998) solves this problem, even though our actor playing God the Son was about 6 foot 6 inches in height (see fig 6). Our floor of 'heaven' was therefore about twelve feet from the ground, and that of a medieval production may have been about two feet higher.

In some pageants, 'heaven' also needs to be an elaborate location (in the York *Last Judgement* pageant of 1433 it evidently had a mechanism to make nine small angels 'run about' in it,<sup>32</sup> presumably at a height great enough not to impede the actors). Aesthetically, we found that the structure of 'heaven' needed to be lighter than that of 'earth', but of comparable height, excluding any pinnacles or spires; this brings the necessary functional height of the *Last Judgement* pageant to a minimum of about twenty feet (perhaps twenty-two feet using a medieval deck height). In fact, the mechanism of the small angels and the slender spire we made them run round brought the topmost point of our pageant set for *The Last Judgement* to a height of about twenty-three feet from the ground (see fig 7). Such a height may seem excessive, but it looks modest compared with some drawings of *ommegang* wagons.

### **Machinery**

One of the major delights offered by the pageants was their use of machinery for special effects. Many of the more complex pageants required machines for at least two special effects each: thus *The Harrowing of Hell* demanded a working hellmouth and gates of limbo that miraculously spring open; *The Assumption* needed a lift to convey the Virgin to heaven and also had a machine for scattering manna; *The Last Judgement* required a whole battery of effects – a lift, trapdoors for the dead to rise through, hellmouth, and in 1433 it also included nine small angels 'running about in the heaven'. The last two cases show that medieval productions sometimes employed extra

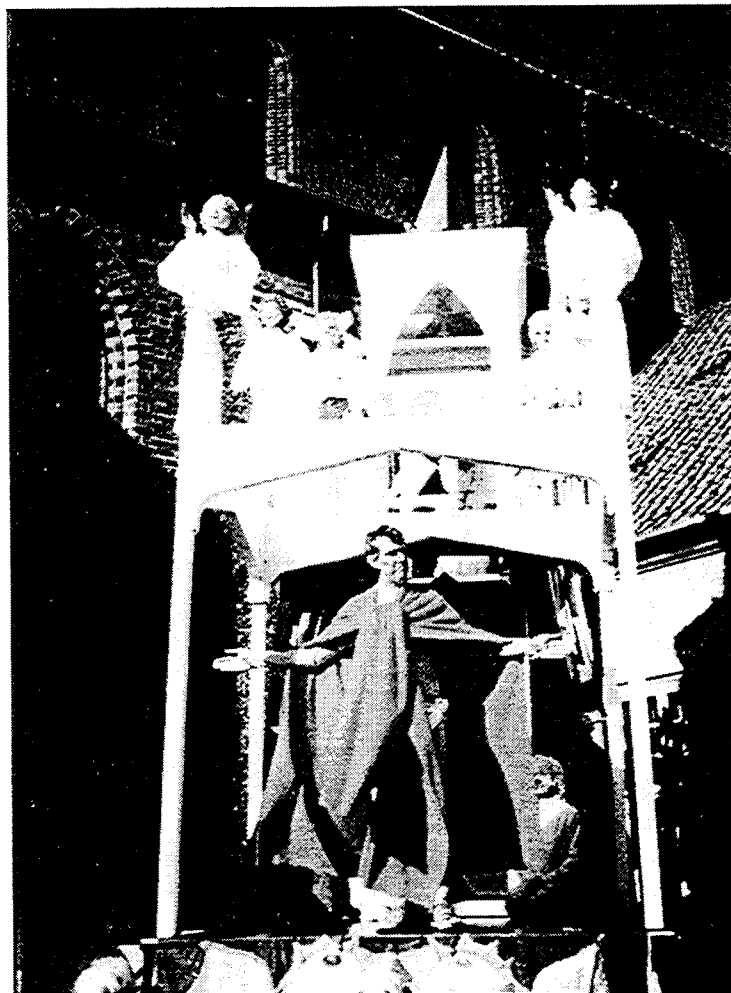


Fig 7. Durham Medieval Theatre Co, *The York Last Judgement* at Odense Cathedral, 1998: Overall view of set from front (photo: Meg Twycross)

machines that are not necessary for the performance of the script as we now have it; and even a play as small as *The Temptation of Christ* needed a working lift and a contraption for making hellish smoke.

The 1998 productions at Toronto included a wonderful diversity of fanning heavens and rainbows, flying birds, moving stars, revolving pillars, and other ingenious machinery, and it seems probable that medieval productions in York had more machines than we saw at Toronto. They are an important part of the



celebratory magnificence of many of the pageants, and most were probably as flamboyant as possible. Where modern set-designers usually ask what machinery is needed, medieval ones may have been more likely to consider what machinery there was an opportunity for.

I will consider only one type of heavy machine – the working lift. This is needed for *The Temptation of Christ* (the Smiths), *The Ascension* (the Tailors), *The Assumption of the Virgin* (the Woollen Weavers), *The Coronation of the Virgin* (the Hostellers), and *The Last Judgement* (the Mercers), and very likely also in *The Transfiguration* (the Curriers – see the stage direction *Hic descendunt nubes* after l.168);<sup>33</sup> it may also have been used on other wagons where we would not now regard it as necessary, for example, for the appearance of the angel during *The Agony in the Garden* (the Cordwainers).

A working lift is potentially dangerous. The Mercers' indenture of 1433 includes a 'brandreth' of iron for God to sit on, with ropes at its four corners. This suggests something like the seat of a modern swing,<sup>34</sup> but when such an arrangement was tried in the 1988 Joculatores Lancastrienses *Last Judgement*, it proved difficult to prevent it from twisting or swinging, or from lifting unevenly, so that the seat failed to remain level; a heavy iron seat which began to swing as God descended could also be very dangerous for any actor standing too near to it. This suggests that most lifts probably also ran in guide grooves, like a guillotine, and an arrangement of this sort can perhaps be seen in the illustration of the *Assumption* wagon from the Leuven *ommegang*; but such grooves imply extra pillars.<sup>35</sup> Such an arrangement also builds in a safety device, since if a rope were to break it would cause the flanges on the sides of the brandreth to jam in the grooves, thus preventing it from falling. This sort of arrangement would also adapt well to lifts which imitated the mandorla shape often seen in pictures of the Assumption, and which would require the actor to stand rather than sit in them.<sup>36</sup>

Lifts probably imply pulleys and winches. It is theoretically possible that they were worked by actors dressed as angels turning a winch at the level of heaven, but the strength required to do this without the mechanical advantage of a pulley would be too much for most ordinary human beings, and the forces exerted by the lifters would be unpredictable and unstable at that height off the ground. All the relevant productions I have seen have sensibly placed the lifting muscle either on the lower deck or more often at ground level, and most have used winches. The Lords of Misrule's *Coronation of the Virgin* (1988) replaced the winch with a bar which was pulled down to lift the Virgin and then hooked into a prepared notch; this worked effectively but it took four strong men to pull it down smoothly (even though the Virgin being lifted was small and light) and

had to be operated quickly, giving a slightly absurd effect. Many of the ascents and descents in the cycle are accompanied by music ('Veni creator' in *The Temptation*,<sup>37</sup> 'Ascendo ad patrem meum' in *The Ascension*,<sup>38</sup> 'Veni de Libano' in *The Assumption*,<sup>39</sup> simply 'Cantando' in *The Coronation of the Virgin*,<sup>40</sup> and 'Hic ad sedem iudicij cum cantu angelorum' in *The Last Judgement*),<sup>41</sup> and this probably implies the slow rise or fall (and the noise) of a winch. The Durham productions of 1988 and 1998 used two sets of pulleys and a pair of small caravan winches, but the latter are obviously a form of modern 'cheating'. The large wooden drum-winch used at Toronto in 1998 looked more authentic, though it required care to avoid tangling the ropes and to make sure that the build-up of rope on the drum remained even as the lift rose.

Lifts also affect the stability of the wagon. A winch cannot be placed immediately under the lift, so it must exert a horizontal or diagonal force as well as a downward one. In the case of someone rising to 'heaven', this force is being exerted at the same moment as the wagon's centre of gravity is rising (because of the higher position of the weight of the lift and its occupant), which also tends to make the wagon more unstable. The wagon also presents a large surface area to any wind that may be blowing in the same direction as the horizontal force exerted by the lift, especially if it is not transparent; and any adverse slope or camber on the street which tilts the wagon downwards towards the winch is also a serious matter. If wagons were anything like as high as I have suggested that they needed to be, measures would have to be taken to eliminate the danger of the wagon tipping over because of a combination of these forces, like a furniture van driving along a motorway in a high wind.<sup>42</sup>

This brings us back to the question of the orientation of the wagon. If the pageant presented a side-on orientation, the lift would also have to be mounted side-on and 'centre stage', so that the person being lifted would face the intended direction of the audience. Part of the width of the wagon would then have to be devoted to a 'backstage' area occupied by the winch(es), and if these resembled the large drums used at Toronto, this 'backstage' would have to be at least two feet deep. The lift and its two or four guide pillars would be immediately in front of the winch, and unless the wagon was very wide, this would effectively divide the available acting area into two separate halves, with very poor communication between them. (Such 'compartmentalization' of the stage did in fact occur in the 1994 production of *The Assumption* at York, see fig 8). An end-facing pageant has by contrast plenty of stage depth and can easily mount the winch(es) at one end without affecting the acting area at all.

It is also more stable to mount a lift across a pageant wagon than along its length.<sup>43</sup> In a side-facing pageant, the horizontal force and any adverse cam-



Fig 8. York Mystery Plays, The York *Assumption* at King's Square, York, 1994 (photo: Diana Whaley)

ber both tend to tip the weight of the wagon disproportionately onto the 'backstage' wheels (thus causing uneven load along both axles), and any assisting wind has the whole length of the wagon to attack; the wagon will not slip sideways, so it will eventually tip over. In an end-mounted pageant, the wind has a smaller relevant surface to affect, and while the horizontal

force and adverse camber will still tend to tip the weight onto the 'backstage' wheels, these are both on the same axle, and thus place the strain on what is designed to be one of the two major weight-bearing elements on the wagon. A simple experiment with a matchbox will show that when it is placed vertically, it is much easier to knock it over by pushing the side rather than the end; and if the horizontal strain becomes too great, a wagon which is end-facing will tend to roll backwards on its wheels rather than tip over.

### Conclusion

I have tried to visualize some of the demands placed on the pageants by their original setting in the streets of York. I have concluded that they were almost certainly performed end-on, and that when they stopped to begin each performance they did not need to manoeuvre, but simply halted and played along the street or into the street junction behind or in front of them. I also think that some of them must have been well over twenty feet in height, and that they probably made flamboyant and maximum use of a variety of ingenious machines, some of which (eg, the manna-scattering machine in *The Assumption*) we have yet to learn how to imitate.<sup>44</sup>

One consequence of this, which emerged vividly in the streets of York in 1988 and 1992, was that people watching in the street do not expect to be as comfortable as a campus-spread audience who sit on the grass with their rugs and picnics. Nor do they necessarily need to see everything (though they must be able to hear everything and to see what is most important). In the 1992 performances of *The Harrowing of Hell* in York, after all the vaunting of the devils over their walls and barred gates, Christ could only approach at street level, so that much of the crowd could not see him at all. His opening words:

*Principes, portas tollite,*  
Vndo youre 3atis, 3e princis of pryde.<sup>45</sup>

came booming out of the audience like the voice of their collective will to defeat evil. Similarly, part of the binding of the devils, which also happened at street level, could be seen only by a few – but everyone could hear it, and knew that they would shortly enjoy the sight of the devils being cast into their own prison. This may suggest that medieval producers may have confined the use of street level to scenes which were noisy enough for it not to matter if part of the audience had only a very limited view of them. When our St Michael had finished casting Satan into hell, he turned to face the Stonegate audience and

was greeted with a great cheer; the sheer intimate excitement of this location is difficult to convey to anyone who has not seen a performance there.

There is of course no one right way (or place) to perform a mystery play episode, and the variety of highly creative productions seen at Toronto in 1998 were a vivid illustration of this. In some places, innovative re-interpretations may be desirable or essential; but in Durham I have encountered a strong popular desire, from actors, backstage workers, and sponsors alike, for accurate rediscovery of a lost tradition. Sometimes it is an impossible quest, but the question 'how did the pageants look and sound then?' will continue to be relevant to the wide variety of shifting re-interpretations of this majestic cycle that are possible now and in the future.

**Appendix***Playing Places in 1569 (with comparisons with 1399 and 1551)*

This table summarizes the following information:

- name of the station in the 1569 list
- direction of the named or implied stationholder (ie, which side of the route the identifying property is on); where the stationholder was mayor or an innkeeper, this is indicated by the letters 'I' or 'M' after the name
- whether the station was at a street junction or not (note that for station 7 the junction is opposite the stationholder, so that a side-on performance facing the stationholder could not use it as audience space)
- width of the station
- whether the same (approximate) station was also used in 1399 (the earliest surviving list of stations) and in 1551 (a plague year with a reduced number of pageants and stations). Both years include one performance at the Pavement but it is not known which of the two 1569 stations this represents; however, in view of the obvious usefulness of the Pavement as a pageant-parking area, station 16 may be the more likely of the two in both years.

<b>Station</b>	<b>Dir.</b>	<b>Junct.</b>	<b>Width</b>	<b>1399?</b>	<b>1551?</b>
1. Holy Trinity Priory Gates	Right	No	c 45 ft	Yes	No
2. Henrison's, Micklegate (I)	Left	Yes	c 45 ft	Yes	Yes
3. The Cooper, Micklegate (I)	?Left	No	35–40 ft	Yes	Yes
4. about St John's Church	Left	Yes	29 ft*	Yes	No
5. Paycock's, Ouse Bridge	?	No	23–7 ft	No	No
6. Ousegate corner	?	Yes	21 ft	Yes	No
7. Appleyard's, Coney St. (M 1551)	Left	Yes[R]	c 23 ft	Yes	Yes
8. Fawkes, Coney Street (I)	?Right	No	c 33 ft	Yes	Yes
9. Common Hall Gates	Left	Yes	22–5 ft	Yes	Yes
10. Chris. Willoughby's, Stonegate (I)	?Right	No	c 25 ft	Yes	Yes
11. Minster Gates	Left	Yes	25–8 ft	Yes	Yes
12. Birnard's, Petergate	Left	No	c 28 ft	No	Yes
13. Hutton's, Petergate	?Right	Yes	22–39 ft	Yes	Yes
14. John Chamber, Colliergate (I)	?Left	Yes	22–8 ft	No	No
15. William Beckwith's, Fossgate (M)	Left	Yes	21–30 ft	No	No
16. Pavement, Harbert's and Sheriff's	Both	No	45 ft	?Yes	?Yes
17. Pavement, Pacoke's and Allen's	Both	No	77 ft	?No	?No

\*including St John's Churchyard

Notes

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- 1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered as part of the conference which accompanied the complete performance of the York Cycle at Victoria University, Toronto, in June 1998. As this performance will probably prove highly influential, it may be useful to compare aspects of its physical presentation with earlier experiments at York and elsewhere.
- 2 The Proclamation of 1415 stipulates that all the pageants are to be brought forth 'by good players well arayed & openly spekyng' (Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (eds), *York*, vol 1, Records of Early English Drama (Toronto, 1979), 25; hereafter referred to as REED *York*); and the 1476 *Ordinacio pro Ludi Corporis christi* requires four of the most experienced actors in York to 'here and examen' all the plays each Lent and disqualify any actors who are 'insufficient personnes either in Connyng voice or personne' (REED *York*, 109). Both these orders show that the council was concerned that the plays should both look and sound effective.
- 3 For example, the dispute between the Weavers and the Cordwainers about precedence in the procession (1490–3), which may have included some breach of the peace, led to firm measures against the latter, including imprisonment and a reproof from the king (REED *York*, 158–9, 162–4, 169–74); in 1551 the city council ordered that only ten pageants should play at ten stations because of the plague (REED *York*, 298).
- 4 The only productions I know of which used end-on staging before 1988 are Stuart Lack's *Christ before the Elders* at York (1960, illustrations in Eileen White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', *Medieval English Theatre* 9 (1987), 50, 52); the Toronto production of the York *Crucifixion* (1977, illustration in David Parry, 'The York Mystery Cycles at Toronto', *Medieval English Theatre* 1 (1979), 24 and discussion on 26); and Meg Twycross' beautiful Chester *Purification* at Leeds and Chester (1983, illustration in Meg Twycross, 'The Chester Plays at Chester', *Medieval English Theatre* 5 (1983), 37, 39, 43); all of these cancelled the effect of end-on presentation by laboriously moving the wagon through ninety degrees at each station to face across the street (though the location at Toronto hardly approximated to a street).
- 5 See Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300–1600*, vol 1 (London and New York, 1959–81), 398–9 and plate 26, no 39.
- 6 See Meg Twycross, 'The Flemish *Ommegang* and its Pageant Cars', *Medieval English Theatre* 2 (1980), 15–41, 80–98 (especially 84–5).

- 7 For an illustration (featuring this author as Moses), see Twycross, 'The Chester Plays', 38; I did not design this aspect of the wagon, but I saw no reason then to doubt its authenticity of orientation or detail.
- 8 John Marshall, "'The manner of these plays": The Chester Pageant Carriages and the Places Where They Played', *Staging the Chester Cycle*, David Mills (ed), Leeds Texts and Monographs ns 9 (1985), 21–3; Meg Twycross, 'The Left-hand-side Theory: A Retraction', *Medieval English Theatre* 14 (1992), 78.
- 9 For discussion and illustrations of *ommegangen*, see Twycross, 'The Flemish *Ommegang*'. There are also excellent reproductions of the drawings of the Leuven *Tree of Jesse* and *Pentecost* wagons in Marshall, "'The manner of these plays"', 32–3.
- 10 For Valencia, see Pamela King, 'Corpus Christi, Valencia', *Medieval English Theatre* 15 (1993), 103–10.
- 11 On the audience dynamics of the 'open space' type, see Philip Butterworth, 'The York *Crucifixion*: Actor/Audience Relationship', *Medieval English Theatre* 14 (1992), 67–76; his 1992 production of *The Crucifixion*, performed at Stonegate, was among the most powerful and moving pieces of medieval theatre I have seen; I saw it from almost the same spot as that from which I almost totally failed to see the side-facing *Death and Burial of Christ*, which immediately followed it.
- 12 For convenient illustrations of both the Brussels wagons discussed here, see Twycross, 'The Flemish *Ommegang*', 25, or Alan H. Nelson, 'Some Configurations of Staging in Medieval English Drama', *Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual*, Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (eds) (Chicago, 1972), 120–1; the wagon carrying the Adoration of the Shepherds is also well reproduced in Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (London, 1974), plate 22; and Marshall, "'The manner of these plays"', 30.
- 13 For meticulous details of each location, see White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', 29–47.
- 14 White, 'Places for Hearing The Corpus Christi Play in York', 48.
- 15 REED *York*, 298; White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', 56. David Crouch, 'Paying to See the Play: The Stationholders on the Route of the York Corpus Christi Play in the Fifteenth Century', *Medieval English Theatre* 13 (1991), 82, shows that there were also ten stations for the Play in 1462, though the reason for this is not known.
- 16 White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', 56.
- 17 See Meg Twycross, "'Places to hear the play": Pageant Stations at York, 1398–1572', *REED Newsletter* (1978.2), 18–20; White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', 53–5; Crouch, 'Paying to See the Play', 99. The



determinedly end-on experiment at York in 1988 was initiated by Meg Twycross, and has been defended in John McKinnell, 'Producing the York Mary Plays', *Medieval English Theatre* 12 (1990), 114–16, and in Twycross, 'The Left-hand-side Theory'; Butterworth, 'The York *Crucifixion*', is cautiously neutral but demonstrates well the effectiveness of 'all-round' performance.

- 18 See Crouch, 'Paying to See the Play', 93, for evidence of use of this room by the dean and chapter in 1483 and 1484; on the latter occasion, one of the spectators here was the archbishop of York.
- 19 In August 1487 King Henry VII saw a special performance of the plays 'in Conyngstrete at thomas Scot house' (REED *York*, 155), which probably corresponds to either station 7 or station 8 in the 1569 list – but as these two were probably on opposite sides of the street this provides no evidence.
- 20 White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', 55, fig 5.
- 21 For the suggestion that wagons had to be 'stanged' round corners by levering the back wheels with long poles, see John Marshall, 'The Chester Pageant Carriage – How Right was Rogers?' *Medieval English Theatre* 1 (1979), 51–2; but for the practical problems involved in this, see McKinnell, 'Producing the York Mary Plays', 113–14. The Valencia wagon of the Immaculate Conception, first constructed in 1542, has a steering pin (King, 'Corpus Christi, Valencia', 104–6), and the same technology was known in Elizabethan England, as can be seen from Hugh Platte's collapsible wagon design of 1594 (Philip Butterworth, 'Hugh Platte's Collapsible Waggon', *Medieval English Theatre* 15 (1993), 128–9.
- 22 REED *York*, 142–3.
- 23 REED *York*, 149.
- 24 For illustrations of *The Resurrection* and *The Crucifixion* at this location, see Twycross, 'The Left-hand-side Theory', 83.
- 25 White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', 37–9.
- 26 White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', 39.
- 27 There is now a bar across Stonegate at the Sun Inn, the bottom of which is about sixteen feet above the street, but this dates only from the eighteenth century.
- 28 Lawrence M. Clopper (ed), *Chester, Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto, 1979), 239.
- 29 The deck of the wagon carrying the Adoration of the Shepherds is well above the heads of the men walking alongside and behind it – see Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, plate 22; Marshall, "The manner of these plays", 30; Twycross, 'The Flemish *Ommegang*', 25.
- 30 King, 'Corpus Christi, Valencia', 109, 110.

- 31 Alan H. Nelson, 'Easter Week Pageants in Valladolid and Medina del Campo', *Medieval English Theatre* 1 (1979), 62–5.
- 32 REED *York*, 55–6.
- 33 Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (London, 1982), 196.
- 34 Peter Meredith, 'The Development of the York Mercers' Waggon', *Medieval English Theatre* 1 (1979), 5–18, especially 9–15.
- 35 David Parry's production of *The Last Judgement* for the Toronto York Cycle in 1977 evidently reached the same conclusion – see Parry, 'The York Mystery Cycles at Toronto', 22, fig 6.
- 36 See McKinnell, 'Producing the York Mary Plays', illustration on 109.
- 37 Beadle, *The York Plays*, 188.
- 38 Beadle, *The York Plays*, 377.
- 39 Beadle, *The York Plays*, 395.
- 40 Beadle, *The York Plays*, 402.
- 41 Beadle, *The York Plays*, 411.
- 42 Similarly, at least three of the Leuven *ommegang* cars (Pentecost, Nine Orders of Angels and The Assumption) seem to have had guy-ropes to prevent their top sections from being blown over – see Twycross, 'The Flemish *Ommegang*', 29–31.
- 43 The exceptional decision to play *The Crucifixion* end-on at Toronto in 1977 was similarly taken because this made the wagon more stable; see Parry, 'The York Mystery Cycles at Toronto', 30.
- 44 On my unsuccessful attempts to do this, see McKinnell, 'Producing the York Mary Plays', 103–5.
- 45 Beadle, *The York Plays*, 338.