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The Pageant Wagon as Iconic Site in the York Cycle

Theories of pageant wagon dramaturgy have ranged from viewing the wagons purely as processional tableaux with no intention of mimetic performance¹ to investing them with all the complexity of place-and-scaffold staging. Cami Agan goes so far as to call the platea a site of liminal experience for the audience, where they 'have the opportunity to draw self into the action/message of the play'.² Sometimes lost in these discussions about the pragmatics or theory of wagon staging is Martin Stevens' caution that 'each [cycle] must be read as a work that has its own demonstrable and unique artistic coherence'.³ This is especially true for the York plays. It is true that the pageants were produced by separate craft guilds, making York 'more nearly a communal enterprise than any other extant English cycle'.⁴ However, the records of performance reveal that the city council exerted a strong centralized concern for the mechanics and means of performance.⁵ The manuscript shows a high degree of stylistic consistency favouring controlled verbal and visual effects over wide-ranging action.⁶ The following pages will examine some specific uses of the platea in the York Cycle – particularly in *The Flood, Abraham and Isaac, The Nativity, The Entry into Jerusalem*, and *The Crucifixion* – arguing that the use of the street as platea was limited specifically to its function as a contrast to the iconography of the wagon stage. Characters leave the wagon or approach it as a means of interrupting or re-establishing the iconic moment represented by that pageant. The dramatic effect on the audience derives from that tension: movement away from or toward the site represented by the wagon stage signifies the disruption or reconfiguration of the stasis of the site.

One of the most exciting developments in the study of medieval drama over the past thirty years has been the general acceptance of the scholarship of performance. The idea that theories of medieval staging can and should be tested by putting them into practice before a contemporary audience has led to a number of historically sound performance recreations in England, Canada, and the U.S. by a generation of scholar-practitioners. Not surprisingly, there

has been continuous debate about whether contemporary theatrical effectiveness can tell us anything reliable about medieval staging practices. The problem is exacerbated because medieval staging practices are so radically different from those of our own day. As Marvin Carlson points out in *Places of Performance*, 'the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance constitute the major historical period when theatre existed as an important part of urban life without any specific architectural element being devoted to its exclusive use'.⁷ In contrast to our theatre buildings which, by their very architecture, define the actor's relationship to the audience and restrict the symbolism of place, medieval performances occurred outdoors in the streets, markets, and other public spaces. The defining characteristic of these performances is the interplay between the locus (the wagon or platform stage defined as a specific location) and the platea (the undefined space around the stage). As Agan notes, 'each time an actor moves into the platea, even if he does so only to allow himself more room to walk, he is changing his relationship to the action and to the audience'.⁸

The York Cycle has provided abundant material for such debates. Performed on moveable wagon stages in the streets of the city, it posits a constantly shifting relationship between the biblical stories represented, the spectators, and the city itself. In practical terms, it offers an intriguing challenge to perform forty-seven separate pageants at multiple stations in the course of a single day. Among those who accept the possibility of mimetic, processional performance, the tendency has been to adopt a liberal view of the relationship between the wagon and the street. Scholars and practitioners have been quick to say not only that action probably occurred in the street but that it must have, based on our modern views of dramatic effectiveness. In the introduction to their edition of the York plays, Richard Beadle and Pamela King note that in most of the longer plays 'all of the action could not possibly have been accommodated on the deck of the wagon'. They invoke the famous stage direction from the surviving Coventry plays which says '*Here Herod rages in the pageant and in the street also*', noting appropriately that it 'has been eagerly seized upon as evidence' for a strong division between action on the wagon and action around it.⁹ Agan goes well beyond practical considerations, arguing that the undefined and unstable 'place' forces audience members into an awareness of their own relationship to the drama. 'The audience members, in continual "threshold" moments, must continually make a choice as to what the platea means in a given moment within the play, as well as what their position means within the cosmic plan of salvation.'¹⁰ I would argue a more conservative view of the use of platea in the York Cycle. In practical terms, a play of this length and complexity could not afford much elaboration of action off of the wagon stage.

The sequencing of all forty-seven episodes requires an efficient, iconic presentation at each performance station. From a theoretical point of view, it would seem difficult to achieve dramatic effectiveness through a series of 'threshold moments' sustained by the instability of the platea. On the contrary, the effectiveness of the York Cycle resides in its containment of the dramatic effect within the ritual of the processional performance. There is a certain power in the framing device of the wagon, which concentrates iconic images within its limited space. At the same time, the procession of those images before the audience is inherent in the text. As Martin Stevens says, 'the platea is therefore the ever-present road on which history processes before the spectator's eyes'.¹¹ When action does occur off the wagon in the York Cycle, it is intended specifically as a contrast to the location defined as the wagon: Abraham and Isaac travel to the mountain for sacrifice; Joseph and Mary approach the manger for the birth of Christ; Jesus approaches the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The guildsmen of York used their pageant wagons as the focus, centre, and container of their episode of sacred history, as the location of their civic identity; action on the street was used sparingly and specifically to illuminate the events portrayed on the wagon.

Of the three possible uses of the platea noted by Agan – as extra space, as journey space, and as 'unlocalized area'¹² – only the idea of journey space reinforces the dramatic design of the York text. The claim that the wagon could not have accommodated all of the action is sometimes exaggerated by contemporary directors who move their actors off the wagon at the first hint that the action is restricted. The view articulated by Kolve that the platea 'was never geographic-ally localized, and there was no pretense that what went on there went on in an imagined locality relevant to the action'¹³ has occasionally led to a corollary belief that any unlocalized action must have occurred off the wagon. Agan wisely reminds us that the various uses of the platea 'may not be so clearly established in any given performance, medieval or modern'.¹⁴

One of the strongest arguments presented for moving off of the wagon is the need for more space. Although we do not know the precise sizes of the York wagons, the narrowness of York streets would have kept them to approximately eight feet wide and ten to fourteen feet long.¹⁵ That may be a small performance space by modern standards, but is the script impossible to play in such limitations? Staging the plays can offer some useful insights. *The Flood* requires that Noah and his family – eight in all – be crowded onto the ark for the better part of the play. The York manuscript contains two Noah plays, *The Building of the Ark* (Shipwrights) and *The Flood* (Fishers and Mariners). *The Flood* can therefore begin with a fully

constructed ark, an icon of the salvation of humankind. Noah, his sons, and their wives enter the ark obediently in the first fifty lines of the play. Even Noah's reluctant wife is coerced on board in the first third of the play; after that, all eight characters are confined to the deck of the ship for the rest of the pageant. In rehearsing the play for performance in Toronto in 1998, we experimented with various configurations to make the staging more visually interesting but the wagon space allowed for little more than a line-up of the characters at the rail of the ship. The resulting image was controlled, iconic, and effective. The visual flatness resembled medieval visual arts (painting, stained glass, illuminations) more closely than our modern preference for 'three-dimensional staging' might have.¹⁶

A second argument is that the 'locus' is defined as a specific place, whereas the 'platea' is 'unlocalized'.¹⁷ This leads to the idea that any action which does not occur in the place identified as the wagon – such as the stable of the Nativity or Herod's court – must therefore occur in the 'unidentified' platea of the street. This is a modern interpretation caused by the contemporary assumption that the stage can only represent one place at a time, and by the mistake of applying place-and-scaffold practices to wagon staging. The first assumption is clearly contradicted by the visual arts of the Middle Ages. It is a distinctive effect for events from various moments in history to appear simultaneously on a painting, carving, or stained glass. This is what Glynne Wickham calls 'a drama in which historical time was brought into conjunction with universal time and in which both remained linked to ritual time in the new Feast of Corpus Christi'.¹⁸ It is also inadvisable to apply the idea of place-and-scaffold staging to processional pageant wagons. In a simultaneous setting where all the stations are visible all the time, it is generally true that action on the platea is the unlocalized activity between the stages. Use of the platea in wagon staging is still heavily debated. The speed and efficiency with which the wagon episodes needed to move, as well as the limited space available in York, make remaining on the wagon much more desirable than venturing down to the street.¹⁹ It is entirely possible that an actor could 'leave' the site represented by the wagon without actually leaving the wagon itself.

The York *Nativity* offers a good illustration of the debate. The wagon represents the manger in which Christ shall be born. In the middle of the play, Joseph leaves Mary to go in search of firewood, during which the star of the Nativity appears. Agan argues that 'it would be impossible, or at least less effective, for Joseph to be led by the star he is already standing directly *under* (Agan's emphasis), which would more likely be the case if he were to

remain on the scaffolding'.²⁰ But the internal stage directions of the text are elusive:

JOSEPH. A, Lord God, what light is this
That comes shining thus suddenly?
I cannot say, as have I bliss.
When I come home to Mary
Then shall I speer.
Ah, hered be God, for now come I.
MARY. Ye are welcome, sir.²¹

One could read a pause between 'Then shall I speer' and 'Ah, hered be God', during which Joseph would ascend the wagon from the platea. But why would he announce 'now come I' if that is obvious from his movement? Moreover, why would Joseph go to the street in the first place? He goes to look for wood but he has no action to perform; no angel appears to him here. His visibility to the audience would only detract from the action on the wagon. If he were simply standing at one side of the wagon platform, looking straight out over the heads of the spectators and remarking on the light he saw (represented by a star above his head), would we not accept this stage picture as his being a short distance from the manger? He need not be on the ground, directing the audience's attention to the stagecraft. The beauty and power of medieval staging is its ability to represent separation, journey, and return in three lines of text and five feet of stage space. As in the other visual arts in the Middle Ages, a great expanse of time, place, and symbolism can be presented in a compact frame.²² Joseph's search for firewood away from the manger does not require that he step off the wagon. The notion that the wagon was the locus and only the locus, and that all other action must occur in the platea, imposes too strict a dogma on medieval dramaturgy.

A third rationale for action off the wagon is that the street was used to represent journeys within the plays. This is certainly the case in York. As Alexandra Johnston has noted, York establishes 'the constant sense throughout each episode that the story of salvation history being unfolded . . . consists of many journeys'.²³ The pageant *Abraham and Isaac* offers a good example of how the platea in York is used specifically for a journey to or from the site represented by the wagon. In this pageant, the two servants are written into the script to tend to the ass which is at the centre of the action for forty lines, until Abraham says 'Children, bide you here still / No further shall you go / For

yonder I see the hill / That we shall wende unto'. Isaac adds, 'Keep well our ass and all our gear / To time we come again you till'.²⁴ These direct internal stage directions are strong evidence for moving off the wagon. Abraham's 'yonder I see the hill' clearly indicates a separation between him and the place of sacrifice. With the action focused on only two characters, use of the street as extra stage space is not necessary. The journey itself is the crucial element. Abraham and Isaac leave the wagon with their gear, the locale changes to the place of sacrifice, which they then approach specifically to take their places in that icon. It is no accident that *The Entry into Jerusalem* likewise uses the image of an ass carrying Christ to the place of his own sacrifice. Isaac prefigures the Crucifixion, and the street is used here to reinforce that image.

Stevens calls *The Entry into Jerusalem* 'the ultimate York play'. In its use of the motif of the royal entry, 'it transformed the city into the stage of the cycle. And in the broadest sense it mirrored the soul of its creation – the civic processional. . . . When Jesus enters Jerusalem, he also enters York'.²⁵ The beginning of the play is devoted to Christ's instruction to Peter and Philip that they 'go forth' (l.34) to borrow the ass which he will ride into the city. The porter tells them to 'take this beast with heart full free / And forth ye fare' (ll.90–1). Thirty lines later (enough time to move onto the wagon) he tells a citizen, 'Here comes of kind of Israel / At hand the prophet called Jesu' (ll.122–3). And in the middle of the play, the Blind Man says, 'Help me to the street hastily / That I may hear / that noise' (ll.314–16). After being greeted by the citizens in the street, Jesus finally says:

My dear disciples, behold and see,
 Unto Jerusalem we shall ascend.
 Man's son shall there betrayed be
 And given into his enemies' hend . . .
 Peter, take this ass me fro
 And lead it where thou ere it took. (ll.461–9)

Christ literally ascends onto the wagon from which he can view the citizens of Jerusalem, who hail him as their prophet. But he has also predicted that this is the place where he shall be betrayed and condemned. His appearance on this wagon now will contrast with *The Conspiracy* which immediately follows, in which Pilate, Annas, Caiaphas, and even Judas occupy the positions of power. The street is used as a playing space here, as in *Abraham and Isaac*, not for pragmatic reasons but specifically to present

the image of a journey. Both plays reinforce the processional characteristics of the entire cycle; after all, the very movement of the wagons to the performance stations is a form of 'playing in the street'. The street is a way, a place of movement, a passage from one location to another. That dramaturgical function needs to be preserved by restricting action to the wagon at other times. The street is not simply extra space to be used whenever the wagon stage seems too small.

Equally practical arguments can be made *against* using the street in the York Cycle. The first is time and speed. We know that guilds were admonished not to play overly long at any station.²⁶ Indeed, the scripts work better when played at a lively pace. The experience of the York Cycle in Toronto bore this out. With forty-seven plays presented at four stations from 6:00 am to 10:00 pm, audiences clearly preferred not to linger over single episodes. For contemporary performers, it takes some effort to realize that a single pageant is one small link in an elaborate dramatic chain and to modify staging choices accordingly. The script itself, with its alliteration and repetition, gains performance energy when presented quickly and precisely.

Another practical argument for staying on the wagon is seeing and hearing. One of the best examples of this controversy is *The Crucifixion*. Most of the action, as we know, involves the gruesome (and comical) activity of the soldiers fastening Christ to the cross. One view is that this activity is simply too complex to occur on the small wagon surface, that the cross must have been placed on the ground. The argument is that our modern concerns about sight lines would not apply: the important spectators would have been able to sit at scaffolding erected at most of the playing stations, and simply hearing the text would have been sufficient for the groundlings. Moreover, 'the close proximity of the actors would appear to compensate for any viewing problems caused by such closeness'.²⁷ On the other hand, without placing Christ on the wagon platform most of the audience would not have seen the majority of the play's action. The text describes in detail the process of crucifixion and requires four soldiers to accomplish it. It does not seem logical to place that activity where few could see it. Moreover, while it is difficult to raise the cross from the surface of the wagon, it would seem even harder (though not impossible) to carry it from the ground onto the wagon and then into the mortise. The most important question is, what is the reason for playing the Crucifixion on the ground? The journey to Calvary is over; no more movement or procession is inherent in the action here. Without some symbolic justification for moving into the street, it would have been more consistent for the York players to remain on their pageant when possible. In her discussion of staging *The Resurrection*, Meg Twycross has

written about audience/actor relations as action moves from the wagon to the street. But as in the Abraham play or *The Entry into Jerusalem, The Resurrection* requires movement from one location to another within the pageant. Twycross notes that in the streets of York there is no room for what she calls 'a respectful gulf' between actors and audience.²⁸ While I agree with her that the York players were very aware of this and used the performance space to their advantage, just what that advantage was is open to our interpretation. I would argue that regardless of scaffolding at stations, sight lines were important and important action should remain on the wagons whenever possible.

There are other particular instances in the York Cycle around which one could debate the use of the wagon versus the street. The Passion sequence clearly uses the street as an important space between stations for Pilate, Herod, and others. Agan's theory about the effects of liminality in the audience's responses to the plays is intriguing:

Because the platea is unstable, its very use necessarily makes audience members unstable, as they may grow uncertain about the place, their place, and the play's manipulation of their historic and cosmic vision. . . . As the action shifts and alters, the audience stands between the cosmic and the historic, between the locus and the platea action, and between their own possible salvation and damnation.²⁹

It is true that the York plays are full of shifting boundaries between locus and platea, between actor and audience, piety and performance. Medieval drama was and is capable of arousing an exciting mix of responses among its audiences. But this 'threshold of revelation', to borrow Tony Kushner's term from *Angels in America*, is not unique to the locus-and-platea dynamic. All good drama strives to induce a degree of liminal experience in the spectator, when we hover between the world of the play and our own world, and are simultaneously aware of both. The achievement of this state has less to do with the proximity of the actor to the spectator than with the consistency of a play's dramatic design and aesthetics. A play's success depends upon matching the right performance choices with the right audience expectations at the right time. The York playwrights had over 200 years to perfect their techniques. The result was a grand cycle of biblical episodes, each presented by a proud guild as a representation of their pride of craft, the whole performance holding a central place in the identity of the city. The aesthetics of the York Cycle rest on the controlled elegance of the pageant wagon, and dramatic action occurred in the street only when necessary in relation to that iconic site.

Notes

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- 1 Alan Nelson, *The Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays* (Chicago, 1974), 38–42.
 - 2 Cami D. Agan, 'The Platea in the York and Wakefield Cycles: Avenues for Liminality and Salvation', *Studies in Philology* 94 (1997), 351.
 - 3 Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton, 1987), 16.
 - 4 Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, 17.
 - 5 The most comprehensive picture of the integration of the cycle into the life of the city is the two-volume publication of the York records of performance: Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Dorrell (eds) *York*, 2 vols, *Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto, 1979), hereafter referred to as REED *York*.
 - 6 Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles* (14), cautions that the manuscript represents only one version of the compiled text and is not itself a performance script. 'The temptation . . . to derive critical conclusions about the manuscript by drawing on the circumstances of performance should be avoided'. However, I am suggesting the opposite – that we can draw some conclusions about performance in York based on the style of the text in the manuscript. This is not inconsistent with Stevens' approach, since he sees the manuscripts as 'the fullest, most developed form of the individual cycles' (14).
 - 7 Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, 1989), 14.
 - 8 Agan, 'The Platea', 347.
 - 9 Richard Beadle and Pamela King (eds), *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, (Oxford, 1984), xxii.
 - 10 Agan, 'The Platea', 367.
 - 11 Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, 69.
 - 12 Agan, 'The Platea', 346.
 - 13 V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, 1966), 23.
 - 14 Agan, 'The Platea', 346.
 - 15 Meg Twycross, 'The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, Richard Beadle (ed) (Cambridge, 1994), 47.
 - 16 Towson University presented *The Building of the Ark* and *The Flood* at the Toronto production of the York plays in June 1998. I am grateful to the University's Office of Sponsored Projects and Research Administration for its support of our travel to Toronto.

- 17 See Agan, 'The Platea', 344–5 for an overview of the opinions of Nelson, Kolve, and Jerome Bush.
- 18 Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (London, 1974), 62.
- 19 This is why Meg Twycross distinguishes between two types of open-air staging – pageant wagon and place-and-scaffold – in her article, 'The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays', 38–65.
- 20 Agan, 'The Platea', 356 n 39.
- 21 Beadle and King, *York Mystery Plays*, ll. 78–85. Quotations from the York plays are taken from this edition unless otherwise noted.
- 22 Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 63–4, notes that 'it was thus as natural (and as easy) for an angel to descend to earth or for a devil to materialize from hell as it was for an actor to pass from Jerusalem to Damascus, from Israel to Italy or from Africa to Europe. This notion of *Teatrum Mundi* . . . established itself firmly enough in the play called Corpus Christi to suggest first "The Theatre" and then "The Globe"'.
- 23 Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The York Corpus Christi Play: A Dramatic Structure Based on Performance Practice', *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, H. Braet et al (eds) (Leuven, 1985), 367.
- 24 Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (London, 1982), ll. 145–50. I have modernized the spelling.
- 25 Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, 51.
- 26 REED *York*, 25, 312.
- 27 Agan, 'The Platea', 365.
- 28 Meg Twycross, 'Playing *The Resurrection*', *Medieval Studies for J.A.W. Bennett*, P.L. Heyworth (ed) (Oxford, 1981), 273.
- 29 Agan, 'The Platea', 367.