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High Places and Travelling Scenes: Some Observations on the Staging of the York Cycle

Quite a prodigious amount of research has emerged on the York Cycle in the past thirty years largely due to the recovery and re-evaluation of the records of performance. Most of the work on staging has been devoted to the question of the processional nature of the York Corpus Christi play and the debate between those who deny full presentation of the plays at all designated stations and those who defend the 'traditional' view.¹ The precise geography and economics of the various stations have also received quite a bit of scrutiny.² What has received comparatively little attention are the practicalities of staging at the individual pageant level, chiefly because the existing records have little to contribute in this regard. (The notable exception here is the elaborate Mercers' Doomsday pageant which is, comparatively speaking, richly documented.³) William Tydeman attempted an 'eyewitness' account of the Passion sequence of pageants in *English Medieval Theatre 1400–1500* (London, 1986) and editor Richard Beadle ventured some judicious staging suggestions in his brief introductions to the plays in *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling* (Oxford, 1984), although in his full 1982 edition of the Cycle his notes are confined to 'Language' and 'Versification'. Reports on the 'yield' of various practical staging experiments of the York plays have appeared occasionally in the journal *Medieval English Theatre* with other observations scattered through the *REED Newsletter*, predecessor of the present journal.⁴ The present paper belongs to this tradition of cautiously offered observations/speculations based on practical involvement with staging York under 'original' conditions.

In the absence of illuminating records directly pertaining to staging for the vast majority of the plays, one must resort to internal indicators in the texts themselves. The process of argument from implied stage directions is admittedly a risky one. Our modern values of 'theatricality' are ever likely to interfere. But if a pattern of spacial indicators can be detected in a playtext,

then we might be permitted to advance a staging model based upon them provided, of course, that it does not contradict the known physical conditions of the Cycle. It will be an article of faith on my part that the spatial imagination of the medieval dramatists was robust and not anaemic, and that each individual piece manifests certain internal spacial needs which, to crib from Aristotle, demand 'a certain magnitude'. I would argue further that for all the York pageants that could be successfully staged on the wagon-top alone, there are twice as many which strongly indicate that the wagon served only as the most important element in a more broadly conceived theatrical space. This space included the street around the wagon (platea) with quite probably the use of wide and ample steps on two or more sides, and perhaps even some other 'riser' elements apart from the wagon. Often these scenes are of considerable duration, not just covering a quick passage from the street level to wagon-top.

I will here be focusing on the conjunction of what I will call 'travelling scenes', fluid units of action, often beginning at some remove from the wagon, that moved through the audience and shaped space within it; and 'high places', the wagon-top itself, where the principal action would be played and upon which the 'travelling scenes' are focused. The many references deep within plays to 'wending' and 'fitting' demand an adequate theatrical representation (not to be confused with a strict, versimilitudinous realism) which a shift from one side to the other of a 12' x 6' (or even a 14' x 8') wagon-top just simply would not accomplish. Similarly, gestural indications of a height to be scaled should involve a significant change of level on the part of the actors. I would assume that the sense of a journey and the act of elevation to a height were as significant for the *theatrical* aesthetic of the Middle Ages as they were for the liturgical, and thus should be accorded their 'certain magnitude' in processional wagon-staging. I will not be discussing here the real 'highs' and 'lows' of heavenly or infernal scenes, but rather plays which firmly take place on Middle Earth. One can find clear examples of these 'travelling scenes' and 'high places' all through the Cycle – in the Genesis plays, the Nativity sequence, the Ministry plays, the Passion sequence, and even in post-Resurrection plays.

This paper does not pretend to startling originality. Scholars, of course, have recognized that the platea was available for certain moments in the plays and participants in the various York Cycle productions have used it, one might almost say, unconsciously. All that is claimed here is a somewhat more expanded view of street-level playing with something of a thematic rationale for it.

A Point of Entry

The following observations flow from practical problem-solving. The University of Michigan participated in the 1998 staging of the complete Cycle at Toronto with two pageants from opposite ends of sacred history, *Abraham and Isaac* and *The Dream of Pilate's Wife*.⁵ *Abraham and Isaac*, particularly, afforded insight into the staging of relatively small-scale pageants.

The Parchmentmakers and Bookbinders' *Abraham and Isaac* presents a very coherent pattern of internal spacial designators. Abraham begins with a lengthy monologue/prayer, then summons Isaac, who in turn brings on the two servants, who load a presumably live ass (or possibly a full-sized wheeled effigy as in the German *Palmesel*) with the sacrificial firewood. This entourage then proceeds to simulate a three-days' journey into 'wilderness'. One found it absurd to imagine all this activity on a wagon-top which would also contain a Mount Moriah spacious enough for the sacrificial scene. It seemed obvious that this activity (some 150 lines worth) should take place at street-level with the journey conveyed by a circuit around the wagon.

The Angel's initial appearance to Abraham is played from the wagon-top (in our staging, above and behind Abraham, ie, Angel experienced as a voice only) which will eventually be Mount Moriah in the 'lande of vysioun'. The Angel's lines 'I sall þe shewe full sone / The stede of sacrifice' (ll.73–4) could be accompanied by a gesture of revelation indicating the rough stone altar which Abraham will then recognize when he completes his 'three-day' circuit. The patriarch's lines at this point have fairly obvious implied stage directions:

Childir, bide 3e here still,
 No ferther sall 3e goo,
 For 3ondir I se þe hill
 That we sall wende vntoo. (ll.145–8)

Again, he orders Isaac immediately thereafter: 'My sone, þis wode behoues þe bere / Till þou come high vppon yone hill' (ll.151–2). The servants are left behind – neutralized off to the side of wagon, at the 'foot' of the hill. They will not be in the picture again until Abraham descends from the height and gathers them up for the joyous final exit – 'My barnes, yee ar noght to blame / 3eff 3e thynke lang þat we her lende' (ll.374–5). Making the wagon-top serve exclusively as Mount Moriah – with the sole set elements a slightly raised, rough stone altar and a bush hiding the sacrificial ram – thereby enhances Isaac's trip up the hill with the firewood giving more opportunity to realize

the typological parallel of Jesus carrying his Cross (our Isaac had his sheaf of long faggots tied to a short cross beam over his shoulders), as well as wonderfully focusing the essential action of the sacrifice deferred.

One corollary of this *Abraham* staging was a deeper scepticism vis-à-vis the old model of the side-on, miniature proscenium-arch theatre on wheels. It would seem that the 'hilltop' pageants particularly – Mount Moriah, the mount of the Transfiguration, Gethsemane, Calvary – benefit from an absence of wagon superstructure, background curtaining, etc, allowing for more viewing points and creating a 'rounder' playing style, and this in accord with recent trends in mystery play reconstruction involving end-on orientation and 'transpicuous' sets.⁶ A drawback of the 'naked hilltop' solution for *Abraham and Isaac* was that the reprieving Angel could not be experienced as coming 'down' to Abraham from heaven. It was a comparatively easy matter, however, for the Angel to appear suddenly on the bare wagon-top to prevent the sacrificial blow.

Examples from the Old Testament to the Ministry Plays

Having dealt with Mount Moriah, one began to wonder if there were other examples of 'high places' (naked hills or hills crowned with a temple or a castle), clearly indicated in the texts, for which this staging might also apply. Let us first look at a selection of moments in the early plays of the Cycle which indicate a similar clear differentiation between low street and high wagon.

In *Cain and Abel*, though we are lacking what must have been one of the comic highlights of the York Cycle, the scene between the drunken Cain and his servant, it seems that Brewbarret's introductory routine (whatever it was besides bearing sheaves) happened down off the wagon for Cain twice calls him to come up to the scene of Abel's murder:

CAYME. Come vp, sir knave, the devyll the speyd,
 Ye will not come but ye be prayd.
BREWBARRET. O, maister Caym, I haue broken my to!
CAYME. Come vp syr, for by my thyrst,
 Ye shall drynke or ye goo. (ll.77–81)

Where else could Brewbarret more conveniently stub his toe than on steps leading up to the wagon-top? Further rhetorical questions – How do we imagine Joseph's fleeing into the 'wilderness' in *Joseph's Trouble with Mary* if not off and away from the wagon? Indeed it seems that the essential rhythm of this piece involves Joseph moving from street-level in his opening monologue, up to

Mary's sanctuary, down from it again, and farther out into the 'wilderness' in his jealous rage, and back again for the reconciliation. Would not Joseph's 'coming home' to Mary in the Tilehatchers' *Nativity* and noticing the special light-effect be most effective if Joseph were down at street level, with the ineffectual, earthy light he has just fetched, and then ascended to worship the radiant Child? The Three Kings in *Herod and the Magi*, most probably on horseback, converge from three different directions (a given since the Latin liturgical drama) and proceed toward 'Bethlehem' where they presumably dismount to then mount up to the wagon-top. The Shepherds are also caught in mid-stride – 'Sen we walke þus withouten were' (l.3) for a fairly long exposition of messianic prophecies. Both are likely extended 'travelling scenes', with both eventually focusing their attention upon the manger *mise en scène* up on the wagon. What does the Soldier mean when he says, after completing the *Slaughter of the Innocents*, 'Wende we vs hense in hye' (l.225), other than that his detachment is to report back in haste to Herod, evidently over some distance, after having wrecked havoc around and about the wagon?

There are other indications elsewhere. Early on in *The Transfiguration* Christ points to the special site – 'For to 3one mountayne will I goo' (l.8) – which would be decidedly unmajestic if it were simply a higher part of the same wagon-top, not to mention the fact that Moses and Elias and a special lighting-effect were also to appear there. To be sure, such a 'special effects' pageant might well have had multiple decks – we are back to the question of how exceptional the Mercers' *Doomsday* pageant was in the Cycle as a whole – but one can alternatively imagine an open wagon-top setting with a 'hollow mountain' effect, something like the popular discovery device of the later court masque.

Let us look now at a few pageants in more detail, plays which display a clear pattern of spacial indicators as in *Abraham and Isaac*. *The Purification* offers strong hints as to extensive street + wagon staging. Only Prusbeter and Anna Prophetissa inhabit the wagon-top, which is the Temple, for the first eighty-seven lines, Anna because of Luke 2:37 – 'a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day'. Mary, Joseph, and Child, as well as Symeon, are evidently at street-level and occupy the next 200 odd lines. Like Abraham, Joseph indicates a height at the end of his 'travelling scene':

Lo, here is the tempyll on this hyll
 And also preest ordand by skylle,
 Power havand.
 And Mary, go we thyther forthy. . . .

(ll.274–7)

After the Holy Family arrives on the wagon-top, that is, 'in' the Temple at about l.287, Symeon similarly indicates that he has been below all this time – 'Nowe wyll I to yon temple goo' (l.350), though not of course in the same 'travelling' space as Mary and Joseph. It is only in the final 100 lines of this 460-line play that all the characters are 'up', in the Temple, for the important verses of praise and prophesy.

Similarly, if the Temple is imagined as a genuinely 'high place' then the Spurriers' and Lorimers' play of *Christ and the Doctors* is also more or less equally divided between wagon-top and street-level scenes. Mary indicates at the beginning that they are some distance from the wagon: 'For we haue trauelde all þis day / Fro Jerusalem many a myle' (ll.27–8). As in *The Purification*, Joseph indicates the Temple height at the end of their travelling scene – 'Aboute 3one tempill' (l.217), and this after searching other parts of 'Jerusalem' – 'boþe vppe and doune ther dayes thre' (l.210), that is around and behind the wagon.

The Temptation also presents some interesting staging from this point of view. Diabolus, the first devil we have seen since the Fall of Man, evidently plows through the crowd – 'Make rome belyve, and let me gang! / Who makis here all þis prang?' (ll.1–2). Jesus no doubt occupies the wagon-top in his meditations, the only pageant where the 'wilderness' is so represented. The play presents an interesting conflation of the 'pinnacle of the Temple' and the 'exceedingly high mountain' of Matthew 4. The Devil does not, moreover, transport Jesus up to the extra, narrow height built on the wagon-top:

Late se yf þou allone may lende
Per vppon heghte,

Vppon þe pynakill parfityly.

Tunc cantant angeli, 'Veni creator'.

Aha, nowe go we wele therby;
I schall assaye in vayne-glorie

To garre hym falle.

(ll.89–94)

Contrary to the Gospels, it is a pair (?) of Angels who transport Jesus to the height. It is quite clear that Diabolous stands below Jesus in this second temptation, bidding him fall down 'Here to my fete' (l.112), but otherwise impotent to transport Jesus where he will. The third temptation of 'all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them' probably does not involve this height again, since only Christ would be in the high viewing position. I would suggest,

rather, that Diabolus shows Jesus the city of York itself – ‘Alle þis wile I giffe to þe’ (l.153) – for a metatheatrical moment played at the wagon’s floor level.

The Entry into Jerusalem, I would presume, uses the wagon-top as the height of the city and that for the majority of the play Christ and his disciples remain at street-level. One might position their group off to one side of the wagon to motivate: ‘Petir, Phelippe, I schall 3ou blisse, / And go togedir / Vnto 3one castell þat is 3ou agayne. . .’ (ll.13–15). This ‘off sides’ orientation likewise creates the city of Emmaus in *The Supper at Emmaus* – ‘To Emax, þis castell beside vs’ (l.14), and later, ‘Se 3e þis castell beside her?’ (l.142) in a play that is obviously an extended travelling scene of ‘walkyng þus wille by þes wayes’ (l.69).

In *The Entry into Jerusalem*, there are several more indications by Jesus that Jerusalem represents a relatively distant, high goal: ‘. . .for ryde I will / Vnto 3one cyté 3e se so nere. / 3e shall me folowe sam and still’ (ll.282–4), and nearly 200 lines later, ‘My dere discipulis, beholde and see, / Vnto Jerusalem we schall assende’ (ll.461–2). This ‘delaying tactic’ is evidently quite deliberate. It is easiest to imagine the donkey ride, again, as a fairly wide circuit around the wagon, perhaps in an imaginary spiral upward toward the ‘city’, with a crowd eventually assembling on the street level as well as above. The wagon-top as the high city is the place where the eight Burgesses and the Porter appear and interact, as well as the Blind Man, who apparently has to be guided down the wagon’s steps to intersect with Jesus:

Sir, helpe me to þe strete hastily,
Pat I may here

Pat noyse, and also þat I myght thurgh grace
My syght of hym to craue I wolde. (ll.314–17)

This I would take to be one of those rare metatheatrical references in the Cycle, together with the Porter’s later vaunt: ‘Perfore I will / Late hym [Jesus] abide here in þis strete / And lowte hym till’ (ll.486–8).

The Lame Man, on the other hand, seems to be already ‘on the flat’ for when Jesus cures him, he orders him to cast his ‘crucchys gode space / Her in þe felde’ (ll.376–7). If Zacchaeus is to climb into anything satisfactorily resembling a tree – ‘Perfore 3one tre I will go too / And in it clyme’ (ll.422–3) – the structure would probably need to be braced against the wagon itself in some fashion. One can imagine Zacchaeus stepping off the wagon-top into his ‘tree’ where he would then have sufficient height to play his scene with Jesus riding below.⁷ It is very clear that Jesus enters ‘Jerusalem’, that is the height of the wagon-top,

on foot. Like many Elizabethan actors who will leave their horses just off-stage to enter upon their scenes, Jesus conveniently disposes of his live (?) mount before the climactic moment: 'Petir, take þis asse me fro / And lede it where þou are it toke' (ll.468–9). The assembled citizens then welcome him up top – 'Hayll and welcome of all abowte / To owre ceté' (ll.543–4).

The Passion Sequence

The plays covering the Passion are of course of the highest order of spacial complexity in the Cycle, including as they do the substantial recastings of the so-called York Realist. If one did not know they were part of a pageant-wagon cycle one might almost be led to believe that stationary, multiple-mansion staging was definitely called for, as in the *N-Town Passion Play*, with its quick 'cross cuts' and in-the-round or semi-round layout. Martin Stevens' theory that the York plays were only fully performed as a group at the final station, the Pavement, makes most sense with regard to this sequence of plays.⁸

Unlike the rest of the Cycle the 'high places' in these pageants are evil, secular spaces, the places of judgement or execution which Jesus visits only as captive, after having been physically abused down below by the Soldier characters. This is clearly the pattern in *The Dream of Pilate's Wife*, the second play offered by the University of Michigan in the 1998 Toronto York Cycle. Pilate's judgement hall equals the wagon-top and the brief exchange between Annas and Caiaphas was taken as a 'travelling scene' which then gathers up the pair of Soldiers and Jesus, rather than as a scene taking place in their (separate) place of judgement. First Soldier clearly storms through the crowd: 'Here, ye gomes, gose a-rome, giffe vs gate, / We muste steppe to yone sterne of astate' (ll.229–30), and Second Soldier underscores a lengthy approach: 'We muste yappely wende in at þis yate' (l.231). Soon after, Pilate invites the prelates 'to þe benke brayde yowe' (l.275). In false modesty (and with perhaps a nod to Jewish unease with Roman spaces) Caiaphas insists that 'laughter is leffull for vs' (l.276). Pilate may only be inviting them up to join him on his dais, but the Harlotry Players' production chose to leave the 'bishops' hovering on the steps for the moment in order that the important message from Filius of Procula's dream be 'privately' conveyed. It seems clear that the Soldiers and Jesus remain below, which is also the space for the Beadle's perplexing 'conversion' scene. After defending himself against the blood-hungry bishops above him, the Beadle is then ordered by Pilate to 'steppe furth and stonde vppe on hight' (l.365). The proceedings having been officially called to order, Jesus is then violently hauled in, or rather up:

II MILES. Go boune þe to þe barre.
 I MILES. Steppe on thy standyng so sterne and so stoute.
 II MILES. Steppe on thy standyng so still.

 I MILES. Flitte fourthe, foule myght þou fare. (ll.382-7)

Again, the choice was not to have the 'barre' or 'standyng' be some slightly raised area on the wagon-top, but rather to play the steps. One can point to one of the minor tortures of Jesus examined by James Marrow in *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art*, the motif called Christ Cast on the Stairs before Pilate, for corroboration here (see fig 1 and fig 2).⁹

The second Pilate play, *The Judgement*, has a similar spacial configuration. The Soldiers are seen returning from Herod – 'But consayue how 3oure



Fig 1. South German Master, c 1480, Christ Cast on the Stairs before Pilate (woodcut)



Fig 2. Hans Baldung Grien, Christ Cast on the Stairs before Pilate (woodcut)

knyghtes ere command' (l.41), and Jesus is several times directed to the 'barre', being 'noght right ferre' (l.138), but his actual entrance, that is, his full ascent to the wagon-top is consistently delayed. The elaborate and extended scene of the knights' banners bowing unwillingly before Jesus and the authorities simultaneously forced 'in reuerence of þis ribald so rudely to ryse' (l.277) would have the greatest impact if a double row of soldiers were arrayed before and up a central step-unit as Jesus ascends to the wagon-top. The scourging scene which ends this play also appears to be below and somewhat removed from the wagon. It most probably involved a self-standing 'swyre' (pillar), for Jesus has to be returned to Pilate from a distance – 'So late lede hym belyve and lenge her no lenger, / To ser Pilate. . .' (ll.420–1) for the concluding iconic moment of high display – 'Sirs, beholde vpon hight and *ecce homo*' (l.434).

Christ before Annas and Caiaphas seems to require a divided scene below the wagon with the Woman, Malchus, and a brace of knights screening the captive Jesus, and a skulking Peter moving in toward them (there is no indication of the biblical warming fire). As the Woman says, 'I will go witte what it may mene, / Why þat yone wighte was hym folowand' (ll.88–9). Jesus must then be revealed to Peter for Jesus' speech of gentle reproach, which replaces, be it noted, the cock-crow of the Gospels. Jesus turning back halfway up the steps to achieve eye contact with the guilt-ridden Peter is perhaps the most elegant solution here. The Buffeting which concludes this episode, unlike the Scourging, could easily be staged on the wagon-top directly for Annas' and Caiaphas' amusement since a stool is called for and we seem to have the blind-man's-bluff game spontaneously generated by the guards.

The Road to Calvary presents an interesting variation. Rather than using a tyrant character and his rant, the play opens with First Soldier who, true to form, seems to plow his way through the crowd with the silent Jesus in tow:

Therefore make rome and rewle you nowe right,
That we may with þis weried wight
Wightely wende on oure waye. (ll.16–18)

One might suggest, however, that the Soldiers' subsequent business of gathering their tools and producing the cross then takes place up on the wagon-top where the John and Mary dialogue and weeping Women of Jerusalem moment would also transpire, for we have the curious spacial indicator from First Soldier some 200 lines later:

How longe schall we stande stille?
Go hye you hens awaye,
In þe deuylis name, doune þe hill. (ll.207–9)

The streets of Jerusalem must have been imagined as occupying one hill and Calvary another. We go down from one to get to the other. The action thus moves off the wagon and points forward to that other height in its concluding moments: 'If anye aske aftir vs, / Kenne þame to Caluarie' (ll.348–9).

In the famous *Crucifixion* the work of nailing Christ to the rood might well have taken place on the flat, that is, in very close proximity to the audience. This was the solution arrived at by the Poculi Ludique Societas in their staging of *The Crucifixion* in Toronto in 1977.¹⁰ Much is made of the fact that the

Soldiers have to transport the nailed Christ up a real hill, a rather inefficient way of crucifying if one pauses to think about it:

II MILES. He menes þer muste be moo
 To heve hym vppe on hight.

 III MILES. Methynke we foure schulde do þis dede
 And bere hym to 3one hille oh high.

 I MILES. Therfore nowe makis you boune,
 Late bere hym to 3one hill. (ll.167–78)

Since Third Soldier hoists Christ's feet, the other three must be lifting at each arm and the head of the cross. They grunt and they groan, bitch, and complain. They even put down their burden for a rest. Second Soldier whines, 'Vnto þe hill I myght noght laste' (l.208). It is not until line 215 that the task is fully completed – 'Or he was heued on heght'. This action has taken up some fifty-odd lines and is not to be confused or conflated with standing up the cross vertically and setting it in its pre-existing 'mortas', a task which the Soldiers accomplish in a mere six lines. Surely the cross would be centrally placed on the wagon top, and it seems rather ridiculous for the four soldiers to take over fifty lines to shift the crucified Christ only a yard or two over the wagon-top. We are confronted then with the rather odd if spectacular (and extra-biblical) display of an already crucified Christ travelling high on the shoulders of the four soldiers from the street level up the steps of the wagon/Calvary before the cross is ever set vertically in the 'ground'.

In *The Death of Christ* which follows, Pilate in his opening monologue twice indicates that, very uncharacteristically, he is standing (or better yet on horse-back, as frequently portrayed in the visual arts) at street-level and gesturing upward:

Who þat to 3one hill will take heede
 May se þer þe soth in his sight,

 Pat he on yone hill hyng so hye
 For gilte. (ll.16–17, 34–5)

William Tydeman seems to require a throne for Pilate to sit on at Calvary, which seems both unnecessary and iconographically odd.¹¹ At least initially, the wagon-top must have only borne the three crosses of Christ and the two

thieves, with the trio of evil authorities down below. Even Josphe of Arimathea seems to begin at a distance from the place of execution, presumably at street level – ‘For wightely my way will I wende’ (l.346) and ‘Perfore go we / To berie þat body in hye’ (ll.363–4).

‘Threshold’ Moments

The model of staging here proposed for a good number of the York plays would be greatly enhanced if we concede that substantial step-units were employed and might therefore have been significant playing areas for ‘threshold’ scenes or moments. These might have been folded and hinged, ladder-like steps attached to the wagon-top or gang-plank devices stored on shelves under the wagon bed, both affording a quick and easy set up. Our modern box-construction step units would probably be very impractical for such rapid deployment unless they were permanent furnishings at each station. An array of significant step-units would also help define a shallow arc of playing-area around the wagon in the platea.

We might have such a ‘threshold’ moment in the *Christ and the Doctors* play where Mary and Joseph observe their son’s disputation with the Doctors and, rather touchingly, Joseph lets Mom do all the talking. Mary notices Jesus inside first, as if she were on the higher step initially. In the *Pentecost* play, the two Doctors appear to wait below ready to pounce on the sequestered Apostles – ‘But warly wayte when þai come oute’ (l.91) – and could hide in plain sight on the steps.

In the arraignment plays of the Passion sequence there are multiple examples; for example, in *Christ before Annas and Caiaphas* a contentious scene is played between a pair of knights above and a pair on the steps, who had just indicated ‘þis is Cayphas halle here at hande, / Go we boldly. . .’ (ll.174–5). In *Christ before Herod* we have a similar scene between courtiers above and the entering, blustering knights. The First Duke upbraids them, ‘Sirs, but youre message may myrthis amende, / Stalkis furthe be yone stretis or stande stone still’ (ll.61–2) – and a few lines later to Herod – ‘þei houe at youre 3ate’ (l.70). Likewise the long exchange between Judas and the obstreperous Porter in *The Conspiracy* would benefit from playing on the steps (Judas indeed is invited to ‘lepe’ up to Pilate at l.203), differences in levels being always a powerful way to convey superior/inferior stage presence or scene advantage. Christ’s words to Peter in *Christ before Annas and Caiaphas* would also benefit from a mid-stairway delivery, with the soldiers in a ‘freeze’ ahead and behind him. We have already discussed the two Pilate plays and their steps.

The Assumption of the Virgin might afford a different sort of example. Thomas begins the play with an obvious 'travelling scene' which ends with the lines:

For I am wery for walkyng þe waies þat I wente
 Full wilsome and wide.
 Perfore I kaste
 Here for to reste,
 I halde it beste
 To buske on þis banke for to bide. (ll.99–104)¹²

It would create a strong visual impression if Thomas draped himself over the upper steps onto the wagon floor ('þis banke') before his witnessing of the miraculous event. He later gives us one of the clearest indications of 'blocking' in the Cycle. On the wagon-top Thomas turns to go fetch the other disciples to the scene, perhaps returning part way down the steps, when he spies the others in the street moving toward him – 'Lo, þe menȝe I mente of I mete þame even here / At hande. / God saffe ȝou in feere, / Say brethir, what chere?' (ll.216–19).

Difficulties with the Model

One is acutely aware of the difficulties inherent in the staging model here advanced. We must not forget the fairly narrow streets of the York pageant route. It is, however, a perhaps false image to see the wagon-stages plowing through a dense sea of humanity, the wagon-top being the only clear and safe playing area. Times Square on New Year's Eve this was not.¹³ There were twelve or more sites, after all, and there must have been a general diffusion of the audience throughout the city, a city with a medieval not a modern population. And there were prepared viewing areas, as well as upper windows, for which everything in a street + wagon-top staging would be completely visible in any case. Herod in *Christ Before Herod* apparently refers to such seating: 'Plextis for no plasis but platte you to þis playne' (l.5). Those not in privileged viewing positions, moreover, would not have had our need for safe audience distance preconditioned by our proscenium-arch staging tradition. They might have been quite comfortable with very close, 'in your face' playing. I would have to believe that these York 'groundlings' were also sufficiently 'socialized' by their theatrical tradition to yield space for 'travelling scenes', no doubt helped by the guilds' own wagon-pullers and/or those functionaries of the stationholders, who presumably collected the admission fees. Soldiers, of course, could make their own spaces with their threatening weapons, tyrants with their authoritative voices. Live animals,

especially donkeys (in *Abraham and Isaac*, *The Flight into Egypt*, etc) and horses (for the Magi, Pilate at Calvary, etc) would also, inevitably, create their own spaces. The pageant players moreover did not have to carve out new playing spaces for each and every one of their performances. These occurred, rather, at specific stations which must have been quite rule-bound, heavily 'coded', and which would have made significant street-level passages relatively easy for actors to play and the majority of spectators to view. These stations might well have had clear spacial markers in the form of supplementary platforms or plinths, banners defining non-audience spaces, etc. Therefore the narrowness of the streets and the close proximity of the audience need not present major objections to an expanded view of the platea in York staging.

Transformations of the Wagon-top Setting

We have not discussed the possibility that the wagon-top *mise en scène* might be changed in the course of a single play, eliminating some of the need for street-level playing advocated here. In *Joseph's Troubles about Mary*, in his flight into the 'wilderness', Joseph mentions passing 'a hill' upon which the reconciling Angel will appear. We would seem to have some use of 'levels' somewhat removed from the wagon itself. An obvious way to avoid the need for two high places would be for Mary's upstage space to be curtained off affording the Angel a neutral height, downstage, from which to address Joseph. Such curtainings-off, however, would be limited by the scale of the second scene required.

Other than the Elizabethan technique of a new set of characters establishing verbally the new setting and context on an empty stage, one can imagine only a very few ways of changing 'scenery' on a wagon-top stage. Were set-elements transformed in any way – revolved, layers peeled away, or significant elements added? This is what we attempted to do in *The Dream of Pilate's Wife*, simply transforming Pilate's throne into Procula's bed, by means of different coloured coverings and pillows for her relatively short scene (unfortunately a trundle-bed coming out of the throne had to be abandoned). Notice as well her Elizabethan-style identifier, 'Nowe are we at home' (l.149).

Even with these possibilities for adaptation, one cannot see how *The Agony in the Garden and the Betrayal* could be so staged. The Garden itself with its extra height for Jesus' retirement – 'Agayne to þe mounte I will gang' (l.84), and the appearance of an Angel – would be hard to screen in order to present, on the same platform, the very busy scene in the court of Annas and Caiaphas with its four soldiers, Malchus, and two other Jews. Clearing the wagon-stage would seem to be an even more inelegant solution, necessitating that the sleeping

Apostles wake up and scurry off and that Christ interrupt his sacred tableau. This play, for one, seems to call for two separate wagons, one representing Gethsemane and the other the High Priests' court, with a violent 'travelling scene' uniting the two. This would seem to be the simplest solution to a massive staging problem and one that would, moreover, preserve the processional nature of the staging, but the records of course are silent on the matter. The Cordwainers had this pageant of the *Agony*, but does pageant (singular) inevitably mean that two wagons could not have been employed for the one play? There is some reason to believe that the Mercers' *Doomsday* pageant had a supplementary vehicle at one stage in its lifespan. If we get into the business of a possible two wagons per play in special instances, then many of the present observations on street-level scenes would need to be modified.

The observations offered here in this rather cursory overview of the staging of the York Cycle should suggest, at the very least, that a wide range of staging solutions might be manifest in the York texts. Especially at the high point of the Cycle's development in the latter half of the fifteenth century, some hundred years on in its playing tradition, we should not wonder at a plethora of staging strategies, a richness of 'theatricalities', of which this high places + travelling scenes model might well be one. The paradigm of the miniature proscenium-arch theatre on wheels is certainly breaking up under the 'evidence' of our practical experimentation. Perhaps in the new millennium we may be able to launch the ultimate experiment, York in York complete and unabridged and where no 'one size fits all'.

Notes

- 1 The central document here is in Martin Stevens, 'The York Cycle: From Procession to Play', *Leeds Studies in English* ns 6 (1972), 37–61, who follows Alan Nelson, 'Principles of Processional Staging: York Cycle', (*Modern Philology* 67 (1970), 303–20). They debate the editors of the REED *York* volume, Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Dorrell, in denying true processional staging for the Cycle.
- 2 See especially Meg Twycross, "Places to hear the play:" Pageant Stations at York, 1398–1572', *REED Newsletter* (1978.2), 10–33; Eileen White, 'Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York', *Medieval English Theatre* 9 (1987), 23–63; and David J.F. 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), 64–111.
- 3 See the reconstructions of Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Dorrell, 'The Doomsday Pageant of the York Mercers, 1433', *Leeds Studies in English* ns 5 (1971), 29–34, and 'The York Mercers and their Pageant of Doomsday, 1433–1526', *Leeds Studies in English* ns 6 (1972), 11–35, as well as Peter Meredith, 'The Development of the York Mercers' Pageant Waggon', *Medieval English Theatre* 1 (1979), 5–18. The Mercers' wagon is obviously a special case and little help in determining the staging for less spectacular pageants which do not require a heaven and hell.
 - 4 See especially Peter Happé, 'Acting the York Mystery Plays: A Consideration of Modes', *Medieval English Theatre* 10 (1988), 112–16; John McKinnell, 'Producing the York *Mary* Plays', *Medieval English Theatre* 12 (1990), 101–23; and Philip Butterworth, 'The York *Crucifixion*: Actor/Audience Relationship', *Medieval English Theatre* 14 (1992), 67–76; as well as an earlier article by Peter Holding, 'Stagecraft in the York Cycle', *Theatre Notebook* 34 (1980), 51–60. The blanks in staging documentation are truly enormous. Clifford Davidson recently reminded us that we cannot even be certain that pageant wagons had modern steering mechanisms (*Technology, Guilds and Early English Drama* (Kalamazoo, 1996), chapter 2).
 - 5 The plays were co-directed by the author and Kate Mendeloff for the University of Michigan's Harlotry Players, who have been participating in the Toronto projects since the 1983 Chester Cycle. All quotations are from Richard Beadle (ed), *The York Plays* (London, 1982).
 - 6 Meg Twycross, University of Lancaster, editor of *Medieval English Theatre*, has recently been championing 'end-on' as opposed to 'side-on' orientation of the wagons. See also McKinnell, 'Producing the York *Mary* Plays', and his article herein.
 - 7 The artist of the 'Entry into Jerusalem' panel in *Queen Mary's Psalter* (early 14th century), which of course predates the York Cycle, came to much the same solution, a tree supported by the walls of the city (British Library, Royal ms. 2 B VII, f 233v).
 - 8 Stevens, 'The York Cycle', 37–61, especially 56.
 - 9 James H. Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: A Study of the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative* (Kortrijk, Belgium, 1979), 127–8.
 - 10 David Parry, 'The York Mystery Cycle at Toronto, 1977', *Medieval English Theatre* 1 (1979), 19–31.
 - 11 William Tydeman, *English Medieval Theatre 1400–1500* (London, 1986), 135.

- 12 There is some indication in the text that Thomas is 'transported' to the site of the Assumption – 'O souerayne, how sone am I sette here so sounde! / Pis is þe Vale of Josophat' (ll.96–7), which might simply mean that Thomas, after playing the crowd during his long monologue, finds himself on the wagon steps. But for another solution see McKinnel, 'Producing the York *Mary Plays*', 105–6.
- 13 The author's recent experience of the essential porousness of the vast Carnival crowds in Port of Spain, Trinidad (1996 to 1998) leads him to believe that our modern sense of 'defence of territory' in a crowd/spectator experience was not necessarily the case in earlier times.