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TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE THEATER OF THE MIDDLE AGES BY
AN IN DEPTH STUDY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PLAYS OF THE YORK
CYCLE OF CORPUS CHRISTI PLAYS

by

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ABSTRACT

Scholastic texts on theater move from the Greeks and Romans to the theater of Shakespeare's time with little or no acknowledgment of the Middle Ages. From the late thirteenth century until the reformation an active community theater known as the mystery plays existed throughout much of Europe. The York Corpus Christi Cycle was part of that movement. The play was produced by the guilds of York under the supervision of the chamber of commerce with the Church monitoring the theology and morals. Performed yearly on the Feast Day of Corpus Christi, the subject of the play was the salvation of man from the creation through the last judgment. This thesis examines in depth the language and characters of four pageants of the forty-eight pageants of the York Cycle Play and draws connections to the writings and teachings of Bishop Thoresby. While many scholars understand the Cycle Play as a municipal production, this thesis argues that the plays were in fact created by the Church as a means to bring their teachings to the Medieval masses.

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PROLOGUE

In the years between 1340 and 1540 York was England's second city after London. The north of England was a center for raising sheep. The area's money came from wood and wool fabric. Some of the finest wool available was shipped all over the world from the port at York. The returning ships brought back wine, fish, iron, timber, dyestuffs and other commodities. As the trade increased so did the need for organization.

During those years cities were run by the guilds. Guilds were run by the masters of each trade. Rules were drawn up by each trades' members. Everyone in each group was bound to obey. No "foreigners" – people from outside the town were allowed to join. Nothing could be made or sold in the town without the supervision of the guild concerned. Historians Carter and Mears write: "The Merchant Guild controlled the trade of a town and regulated prices. The Craft Guild controlled the manner in which a man might enter a trade, and the manner in which he might afterwards practice it" (212).

The guilds had their own chapels, churches and priests to serve their community. The Church had influence over everything in the middle ages. There was no separation of church and state. Priests shepherded the faithful through their whole life with the sacraments of Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation, Marriage, Extreme Unction (anointing of the dying). Church schools taught reading, writing, mathematics, and music with the view of training more priests. All this was done in Latin.

The church holy days – Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter – were holidays. The Feast of Corpus Christi, sixty days after Easter, was (and is) principally celebrated with processions of church dignitaries displaying the Sacred Host in a golden case. In addition some

communities produced special plays on that day. One of these, The York Corpus Christi Play, was famous all over England.

England had three languages at that time. English was spoken by the common people. Latin was used by the church for reading, writing and ceremonies. Norman French arrived when William of Normandy conquered England in 1066.

The Church did its communicating in Latin. The clergy spoke French to the upper classes, who used French to read, write, and communicate among themselves. English was used by and spoken to the common people. In *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* Anderson points out that "...by the thirteenth century it is safe to say that French was the dominant literary language, and Latin the medium of scholarship, while English remained the speech of the common people" (Anderson, 52). He continues: "the clergy, even those who habitually spoke French, were expected to be able to preach in English in order to reach the common people" (Anderson, 52).

CHORPUS CHRISTI PLAY

In York between 1350 and 1587 a series of “pageants” known as the Corpus Christi Play were performed annually. The approximately forty-eight separate scenes were each produced by a different city guild. Thousands of people came each year to watch. Not just ordinary citizens; kings (Richard II 1399, Henry VII in 1487) and near Kings (Richard III before his coronation) came to this nationally famous event (White 30).

Why was this play produced? Textbooks about this period casually place teaching in the same category as stained glass windows and sculpture. However, stained glass windows and sculpture remind people of what they already know. Why, then, a play about God and the salvation of mankind? Was this new information, or, like the stained glass windows and sculpture, did it remind the people of something they already knew? The *YORK MEMORANDUM BOOK, 1399*, contains the only explanation found so far from the citizens of York: “The said pageants are maintained and supported by the commons and the craftsmen of the same city in honour reverence of our Lord” (White, i). This is the only explanation that currently exists, but the speed with which the plays were developed suggests that there is more to the story.

INTRODUCTION

The teachings of the Catholic Church come from the Bible and tradition. The Corpus Christi Play of York does this teaching by presenting a series of parables. These parables start with God creating the world. Several old testament stories then explain mankind's slide into sin and the need for a savior, Jesus Christ. The majority of the parables describe the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The play ends with God's last judgement. This paper is particularly concerned with the first pageant: *The Creation, and the Fall of Lucife*; two pageants from the old testament section: *The Building of the Arc* and *Noah and His Wife* *The Flood and Its Waning*; and the last pageant: *The Judgement Day*. The Play contains 48 pageants – a list follows.

SMITH'S LIST OF THE PAGEANTS
OF THE CORPUS CHRISTI PLAY OF YORK

The Guilds

The Barkers

The Plasterers

The Cardmakers

The Fullers

The Coopers

The Armourers

The Glovers

The Shipwrights

The Fysshers and Mariner

The Parchmentmakers and Bookbinders

The Hosiers

The Spicers

The Pewterers and Founders

The Tilehatchers

The Chandlers

The Masons

The Goldsmiths

St. Leonard's Hospital

The Marshals

The Girdlers and Nailers

The Spurriers and Lorimers

The Barbers

The Vintners

The Plays

The Creation, The Fall of Lucifer

The Creation to the Fifth Day

The Creation of Adam and Eve

Adam and Eve in Eden

The Fall of Man

The Expulsion

Cain and Abel

The Building of the Ark

The Flood

Abraham and Isaac

Moses and Pharaoh

The Annunciation and Visitation

Joseph's Trouble about Mary

The Nativity

The Shepherds

Herod

The Magi

The Purification

The Flight into Egypt

The Slaughter of the Innocents

Christ and the Doctors

The Baptism

The Marriage at Cana

The Currirs	<i>The Transfiguration</i>
The Ironmongers	<i>Jesus in the House of Simon the Leper</i>
The Cappers	<i>The Woman taken in Adultery/The Raising of Lazarus</i>
Skynners	<i>The Entry into Jerusalem</i>
The Cutlers	<i>The Conspiracy</i>
The Bakers	<i>The Last Supper</i>
The Cordwainers	<i>The Agony in the Garden and the Betrayal</i>
The Bowers and Fletchers	<i>Peter Denies Jesus, Jesus and Caiphas</i>
Tapiters and Couchers	<i>Dream of Pilate's Wife, Jesus before Pilate</i>
The Litsters	<i>Trial before Herod</i>
The Cooks and Waterleaders	<i>Second accusation, Remorse of Judas</i>
The Tilemakers	<i>Second trial continued, Judgment on Jesus</i>
The Shearmen	<i>Christ led up to Calvary</i>
The Pinner	<i>Crucifixo Christi</i>
The Butchers	<i>Mortificacio Christi</i>
The Saddlers	<i>Harrowing of Hell</i>
The Carpenters	<i>Resurrection, Fright of the Jews</i>
The Winedrawers	<i>Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene</i>
The Woolpackers and Woolbrokers	<i>Purification of Mary</i>
The Scriveners	<i>Incredulity of Thomas</i>
The Tailors	<i>The Ascension</i>
The Potters	<i>Descent of the Holy Spirit</i>
The Drapers	<i>The Death of Mary</i>
The Linenweavers	<i>The Funeral of the Virgin</i>
The Woollenweavers	<i>Assumption of the Virgin</i>
The Hostlers	<i>The Transfiguration</i>
The Mercers	<i>The Judgment Day</i>

This thesis will focus on the following scenes from the above list:

The Creation and The Fall of Lucifer

The Building of The Ark

Noha and His Wife, The Flood and Its Wanning

The Judgment Day

THE FIRST PAGENT: THE CREATION, THE FALL OF LUCIFER

THE BARKERS

Barkers stripped the bark from the logs of certain species of trees after they had been cut down. This bark was mixed with water and other ingredients to make liquids used in tanning leather. Rotting tree bark was one of the more socially acceptable substances used in tanning.

Leather was a staple product, crucial for goods made by other guilds; making the Barkers and Tanners guild one of the larger and more prosperous. They had the funds to stage an elaborate pageant such as *The Creation*. The guild had access to furs to costume Devils as the evil looking hairy animals with ram or goat horns shown in the art of the period.

Odors had great symbolic significance. Good people, places, even situations were thought to give off beautiful smells (Beadle 10). The opposite—bad people, places, and situations—gave off a foul stench. In the play, The Hells mouth as it expelled the devils would have reeked of sulfur gas and similar odors of decomposition. Tanneries were notorious sources for such smells.

THE CREATION, THE FALL OF LUCIFER

The Catholic religion regards the Bible and tradition to be the sources of redemptive knowledge. The Corpus Christi Play, then and now, is regarded as biblically based. Some sections are directly from the Bible. The Bible available for use at the time was the Latin Vulgate, translated from the original Greek and Hebrew by St. Jerome. With minor alterations this Latin Bible is the Bible of the Catholic Church today.

At the beginning of the play God proclaims, as documented in *Revolutions* 1:8, in Latin, “Ego sum Alpha et O. vita via, Veritas primus et nouissimus.” (“I am Alpha and Omega: The life, the way, the truth, the first and the last”). Then he says in English, “I am gracious and great, God without beginning.” He creates nine orders of angels to praise him. He appoints Lucifer, bearer of light, in charge as long as Lucifer and his followers obey God. God turns away to continue his work; as soon as God has his back to Lucifer, Lucifer proclaims to the other angels that he (Lucifer) is as great as God. For this sin of pride God orders Lucifer and his followers into Hell to become devils. God says the disobedient have been punished. Now he will create mankind but first he will create a place for them. He first gives all his blessing.

The story of Lucifer, the angel who from sinful pride falls from heaven to become the Devil, has been part of Christian tradition since the early days of the church; so much so that the name Lucifer does not need to be explained. The tumbling of devils into the world because of the sin of pride foreshadows the fall of man. Most think this is right from the Bible: only it was not. Lucifer is not in the Bible.

Lucifer, the leader in *The Fall of Lucifer*, is not depicted in the Bible. Lucifer and the nine choirs of angels, known from references in literature to lectures in Sunday school, is from a pre-Christian writing titled *The Book of Enoch*. Lucifer is thought of as Satan. He and the fallen Angels figure regularly in sermons about pride and/or the problems brought about by disobedience. Though some think he is in the Bible, he is *not*. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*: The name *Lucifer* originally denotes the planet Venus, emphasizing its brilliance ([Scannell](#)). The Vulgate employs the word also for "the light of the morning" (Job 11:17), "the signs of the zodiac" (Job 38:32), and "the aurora" (Psalm 109:3). Metaphorically, the word is applied to the King of Babylon (Isaiah 14:12) as preeminent among the princes of his time; a pre-Christian writing *The Book of Enoch*:

And one from out the order of angels, having turned away with the order that was under him, conceived an impossible thought, to place his throne higher than the clouds above the earth, that he might become equal in rank to my power. And I threw him out from the height with his angels, and he was flying in the air continuously above the bottomless.

These two translations were crossed and entangled before Jerome translated the Bible. The story was old before the Corpus Christi Play was written. The Bible does not explain devils. This traditional story fills a need for explanation so well people do not think to ask the source

.

THE EIGHTH PAGENT:
THE BUILDING OF THE ARK
THE SHIPWRITES

The Shipwrites were a small guild (Beadle 15). The shipwright, with his journeymen and apprentices, crafted one large expensive item at a time. Built mostly for the local market, ships were not a regular export item with a high financial return.

During the time of the Corpus Christi Play there were approximately ten shipwrights in York with their journeymen and apprentices (Beadle 15). Highly respected for their skills but small in numbers this guild produced *The Building of the Ark*.

THE BUILDING OF THE ARK

The Building of the Ark is a very short play. God tells Noah how to build the Ark, Noah does it, and God then tells Noah how to prepare for the flood. Noah speaks twenty-five lines during the building of the Ark. These lines have the cadence of a radio play.

Radio plays have a different rhythm compared to visual plays, caused by the additional words necessary to set the stage or explain the action. In a radio play, after a “wolf whistle” a character, needs a line like “You look great in that sexy blue dress”, in order for the audience to understand the scene. During a visual play the whistle should say it all.

The radio cadence of Noah’s working lines implies that the audience cannot see him well enough to follow the action visually. They must hear him and imagine the action. This cadence occurs in other pageants but is most noticeable during *The Building of the Arc*.

The building of the Ark is the center and purpose of the play. The mystery of this mystery play is “How did the masters of the shipwrights’ guild dramatize this?” Twenty-five lines are not a very long time to build a boat. Speeches say that Noah did the building alone.

Additionally the pageant had only a short time (see Appendix A: Route of the Play) before it had to move on, making way for the pageant of *The Flood*. Noah could have been miming the action or putting together a prefabricated unit. How long will an audience watch one man build a boat in silence? However they simulated the boatbuilding, the crew for this play had to undo it. The operation was then repeated at least eleven more times as the pageant moved around York. The shipwright talks about building the boat. How did he do this? The technical aspects of this pageant have caused more speculation than any other point. The

last few lines make the technical aspect easier. God instructs Noah about loading the animals. The pageant ends before the loading begins.

THE NINTH PAGENT:
NOAH AND HIS WIFE THE FLOOD AND ITS WANING
THE FYSSHES AND MARYNARS

The Fishers and Mariners Guilds were mid-level guilds; not the most wealthy but not the poorest either. Both guilds dealt in fish. The first caught and sold fresh fish from the rivers. The second transported and sold salt water fish from the seacoast. Fish was a major dietary item as the Catholic Church required three fast (meatless) days a week; Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. (Friday remained a fast day until Vatican II in the early 1960's when observance became voluntary.) The parish church of the Fysshers and Marynars, the Church of St. Denis, is still an active church in the original building (Beadle 22).

NOAH AND HIS WIFE: THE FLOOD AND ITS WANING

This pageant was included in the Corpus Christi Play as foreshadowing of the story of Christ. The play follows the outline of the story of Noah's Ark exactly as in the Bible. The author of the pageant supplied personalities and conversation. This section of the Bible names only Noah and says his sons had wives. The details of the flood, the raven and the dove are as in the Bible.

The Flood tells of the destruction of the world except for one family. The family is saved because they followed the commands of God in their daily lives. He tells them to board the Ark and they comply.

The play, read without religious background, sounds like a situation comedy/disaster story. A man realizes a major catastrophe is about to happen. He readies an escape method, loads everything his family will need and *then* goes to tell his wife who provides comic relief by a display of independence.

. Wife: What, weens thouso for to goquit?

Nay, by my troth, thou gets a clout. (Smith 48)

Noah convinces his wife she must obey God and her husband. Obedience will save them. This pageant foreshadows the coming of Christ and the end of the world. *The Flood* could be played separate from the rest of the Corpus Christi Play and be intelligible. The audience having some knowledge of the Old Testament would help them understand it; as would playing *The Building of the Ark* as a prelude so that the audience would understand how the ark was already built and loaded as the play *The Flood* begins. Also the Corpus Christi Play could be played without *The Building of the Ark* and *The Flood* and not lose continuity.

The play starts with a monologue by Noah about how he came to build the ark. The oldest son is sent to fetch Mrs. Noah. Noah has taken his sons into his confidence about the ark. The sons have helped him build it. When the oldest son convinces Mrs. Noah to come to the ark the speeches illustrate the changes happening in English. Spelling and meaning are erratic and demonstrated why Latin continued to be in use when accuracy was important. (see Appendix A)

1fil. Moder, certyne

My ffadir thynkis to flitte full ferre.

He biddis you haste with al youre mayne.

Vnto hymm I wol come nomarre.

Vxor. 3a, good sone, hy þe faste agayne,

And telle hym I wol come no narre.

1 filius. Dame, I wolde do youre biddying fayne,

But yow bus wend, els it be warre.

Vxor. Werre? þat wolde I witte.

We bowrde al wrange, I wene.

1 filius. Moder, I saie you yitte,

My ffader is bound to flit.

Vxor: Now certes, I shall not sit

Ere I see what he mean. (Smith 47)

The meaning of words can change over time; sometimes only a little, sometimes a great deal. An example is the word “flitte”. The current Webster’s dictionary gives, as the first definition of flit, to move about rapidly and nimbly (*intr.v.*) or a fluttering or darting

movement (*noun*). This word could describe what Noah is going to do but not why Mrs. Noah reacts so strongly when she finds out about it. Webster's also gives two definitions labeled *British Informal*. The first is to move house; relocate. The second is a hasty escape or departure, as to avoid payment of rent. An earlier definition comes from a different source; *Scottish Highlanders* by Charles MacKinnon.

Describing tenants being evicted from land the tenants had farmed for generation Mr. MacKinnon told a story. An old man whose wife had died the first time they were evicted heard he was to be evicted again. He said, as he stood over her grave, "Well, Janet, the Countess can never flit you again.'" In the eighteenth century 'flit' mean 'evict'. The meaning of the word "flit" has gone from relocating to being evicted.

Mrs. Noah is worried about Noah. What has he been doing all those nights he came home late? A middle-aged wife's first thought when her husband has been staying out late at night and comes home dirty and disheveled is not that he has been talking to God! She wants to know just what he has been doing. The mid-life crisis is not a new phenomenon. Noah and his sons must convince her that they have been building an ark and loading animals. Mrs. Noah has to be convinced she should enter the ark. She protests a need to go home and pack. Her family says there is not enough time. Realizing the seriousness of the situation she tries to go and get her friends and other family members, but she is not allowed to fetch them. This conflict between Noah and his wife allow the demonstration of emotion.

The only mention of Mrs. Noah in The Bible is to state that Noah had a wife. The author of *Noah and the Arc* invented the whole character of Mrs. Noah. By creating her as an individual, caring person, the author wrote one of the first interesting female roles in the English language. The character of Mrs. Noah is funny because she is true to life; she cares

about her husband, family, and friends. After the storm she is the only one who shows sorrow for all who died. Noah states “Dame, all ar drowned, late be dyne, / And some thei bought ther synnes sore.” He feels they brought their drowning on themselves by sinful living (Smith 53).

From the Reformation to now the telling of the Noah story centers on the animals. Pictures show the Ark on the far horizon and a long line of pairs of animals winding its way toward it. Before the reformation the focus of the Noah story was on God destroying the world by flood because of mankind’s sins. God ordered Noah and his family, as the last good people, to build the Ark for their salvation. The picture of Noah’s story from the *Holkham Picture Bible* has Noah with the dove and the raven (Brown). The stained glass window of Noah’s story in York minster, the Cathedral in York, has Noah and his wife with what looks like the family dog. No other animals are shown. The Noah pageant contains four lines concerning non-domestic animals:

Of euery-ilke a thyng,	Of every single thing,
He bad þat I shuld bryng	He bid that I should bring
Of beestis and foules zynge,	Of beasts and fowls young,
Of ilke a kynde, a peyre.	Of each kind a pair. (Smith 49)

These four lines are early in the play as Noah is trying to explain to his wife what he has been up to when he has been leaving her alone at night. Thirty-five lines later Noah commands his sons to:

To thes catelles takes goode hede.	Of these cattle take good care.
Keppes þam wele with haye and corne;	Keep them well with hay and corn;

And, women, fanges pes foules and feede; And, women care for these fowl and feed;
(50)

These three lines refer only to cattle and barnyard fowl.

In the last speech of the play Noah states, mixed in with other things:

Beastes and foules sall forthe be bredde, Beasts and fowls shall forth be bred,
These beestes muste be vnbraste, These beasts must be unbraced,
(55)

All of these lines refer to animals that are off stage. No animals need to be on stage except a raven and a dove. Both these birds have an active part concerned with the finding of land. If they had staged all the animals, it would have changed the focus of the play. Not having the animals on stage kept the focus on God picking his chosen few and getting rid of the rest.

A French term is used in the play to address Mrs. Noah; six times by her oldest son and five times by Noah. In French it is a shortened form of Mesdames, a respectful way of addressing a lady. In English it had also come to be a respectful form of address for lady. The word continued evolving in that direction and is now the title a lady who is a knight in her own right. A man made a knight is addressed as Sir _____. His wife is addressed as Lady _____, a lady who is made a knight in her own right is addressed as Dame_____. (The American use of the word, such as in the song “There is Nothing Like a Dame,” from the musical *South Pacific*, was picked up directly from the French).

Among the last lines of the play, as Noah explains to Mrs. Noah what will happen next, are two lines that Noah gives as direct quotes from God. Up till this point Noah has related

the commands from God. These are the only direct quotes. God is very unhappy with the sinfulness of mankind and then:

“Dum dixit ‘Penitet me’ trans. Then he said ‘It pains me’”(54). He is sorry that he ever made mankind. But now after the flood he feels mankind has been punished enough and:

‘Arcum ponam in nubibus’, trans. I will place a rainbow in the clouds (54). The rainbow will be a sign that God will not destroy the world a second time with a flood. These two lines in Latin illustrate the belief if God were to speak he would speak Latin. The translations show the author was not confident the audience would understand the Latin.

The use of a term borrowed from the French is not surprising. Neither are sentences in Latin. (see Appendix A: Understanding Language in England from 1066 to 1600)

As the play is ending Second Son speaks up, wanting to know if God, having said the world cannot be destroyed by water; will allow the world to last forever. Noah replies that the world will not last forever. At the end God will destroy the earth by fire. Mrs. Noah is horrified by the thought of another catastrophe. Noah, with exasperated expression, tells her the destruction by fire will not happen for hundreds of years. Mrs. Noah is relieved. The end is their new beginning.

THE FORTY EIGHTH PAGENT:

THE LAST JUDGMENT

THE MERCERS

The Company of Merchant Adventurers is the official name of this guild. The members were merchants who bought and sold items they had not made; particularly in the import export trade in wool and cloth. The adventurer part of the name referred to the risking their own money. The organization was well established when their new hall was begun at the present site in 1357. From then until the present day the guild has been run from that site. Although the purpose of the guild has changed over the years the organization has continued in an unbroken line. One result of this continuity is the guilds' records, especially early ones, are still available for research.

The "minutes" of guild business meetings contain careful records of money collected, payments made, and the votes on business affairs. Some of these records are about the mercers building and maintaining the play (Carter and Mears 211).

THE LAST JUDGMENT

The Last Judgment opens with God speaking of what he created and how mankind has gone wrong. God explains it is time to end the world. He will take the good with him to heaven and send the evil to the devil in hell. He sends his angels to blow their trumpets. The good and bad souls come. Christ appears and summons the apostles to watch the judgment. Christ sits in the seat of judgment and divides the souls; those obedient to the corporal works of mercy to heaven and the disobedient to hell.

The first and last pageants of York's Corpus Christi Play are remarkably similar. In the first God opens the pageant speaking of his happiness with the heavens and angels he has created. In the last pageant God speaks first about the division of the heavens into light and darkness ruled by angels and devils. Man is created, falls from paradise and goes on falling until God feels he must save a few (Noah's family) and remove the rest with the Flood. God, as mankind again grows sinful, sends his Son to ransom sinners from the devil with His suffering and death. Mankind has gone on with sinfulness and pride. Out of patience God decides it is the time to end the earth. He sends his angels to begin the Last Judgment. Scrutinizing records of each person's deeds, he divides the good to the right (Heaven) and the bad to the left (Hell).

Unlike in *The Fall of the Angel*, that appears to be from the Bible but is not, the main section of *The Last Judgment* is directly from the Bible; the twenty-fifth chapter of the gospels of Mathew. Mathew describes why those on the right will be ushered into heaven; "For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat, For I was thirsty and you gave me to drink..." (Latin Vulgate, Douai Rheims, Matt. 25. 36 – 47).

These are now known as the seven corporal works of mercy: Feed the hungry; Give drink to the thirsty; Welcome the stranger; Clothe the naked; Visit the sick; Visit the prisoner; Bury the dead.

The bad souls are shown into Hell for not doing these things.

The gospel of Matthew is part of the regular cycle of gospels read on Sunday and Church holidays (Christmas, Easter and so on) before the consecration, the most important part of the mass. These gospels are considered to contain the necessary lessons of the New Testament and are arranged to correspond with the focus of the mass. The Mathew 25 gospel is read on the last Sunday before Advent. The church year starts with Advent (preparation time for the Nativity), putting the Mathew 25 gospel at the end of the liturgical year just as the merchants' pageant is in the play. The verse reads:

And when the Son of man shall come in his majesty, and all the angels with him, then shall he sit upon the seat of his majesty. Then shall the king say to them that shall be on his right hand: Come, ye came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. (Matthew 25)

This verse in the play is very similar to the Nicene Creed, which was also then being translated into English by Bishop Thoresby. The modern Nicene Creed reads:

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,

maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end. (“What We Believe”)

Mathew 25, the Creed, and the Last Judgment Pageant all explain that the good will be saved, in addition to Mathew 25 explaining how the good are separated from the bad. Then shall the king say to them that shall be on his right hand: Come, ye came down from Heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE CORPUS CHRISTI PLAY

The outstanding similarity of the four pageants is their theme of obedience. People should obey their husbands, fathers, guild masters and most of all God. If they do, all will be well, now and at the end of the world. If not they will suffer damnation. Scholars have not yet adequately considered the plays in the context of the society in which they existed.

The teachings of the Catholic Church come from the Bible and tradition. The Chorpus Christi Play of York [does this](#) teaching by presenting a series of parables. These parables start with God creating the world, followed by several Old Testament stories explaining how mankind came to need its savior, Jesus Christ. The majority of the play describes the birth, life, death, and resurection of Christ.

The great plague was the closest the world has ever been to its end. More than half the population of Europe died. Estimates are that between one third and one half the population of York died between 1348 and 1350, leaving the remaining people to pray for the deceased and to pray for the strength and knowledge to go on. For help with the physical and mental trauma, the survivors went to the source of all social services at the time –the Church. The church handled education at all levels, social services such as the care of the sick, aged, and poor and the keeping of major civil records of birth and marriage.

During the plague, the group with the highest mortality was the priests, monks, and nuns because they were taking care of the ill and burying the dead. The estimated death toll for the clergy was eighty percent. (Wood 199) In the past these workers had been trained both in their pastoral duties and their knowledge of the church in Latin. However, future

priests, nuns and monks no longer had adequate numbers of teachers to continue all teaching in Latin. This was not just a problem in the Church (see Appendix C).

There was further civic upheaval. York required people who wanted to be part of the civic and economic life of the city to become Freeman. There was a considerable fee for the privilege of being a Freeman. To avoid the problems of more members than the civic system could handle, only about fifteen new Freeman were made each year. This number was enough to replace the openings left when Freeman had died or moved.

In the business year after the plague, two hundred and sixty people became Freeman. These people were able to pay the fees to become Freeman in part as a result of inheritances from those struck down by the plague. The number of new Freedmen in that year showed the high mortality that the plague had taken on the city, as well as the faith the residents had in the future of the city (“The Black Death”).

These new Freeman would then need to join a guild, again with fees, in order to practice their craft. These entrants brought in “new money.” Money would have been available in all the guilds to start a project like the funding of an educational play. This would have been a large increase in available funds as compared to years prior to the plague. So at this point in time, there is both available funding and a need for religious education.

Edward I brought in Archbishop Thoresby, then the Chancellor of England, as a result of the post-plague chaos in York. Thoresby was Archbishop from 1352 to 1373. It seems safe to assume the play developed during this time (Dixon 456). To help the laity understand their religion and their duties within it, a catechism was written in Latin and English. Bishop Thoresby of York brought out this catechism in 1356. The catechism contains the Ten Commandments, the acts of faith, hope and charity, the Our Father, Ave Marie (Hail Mary),

the Nicene Creed, the works of *bodily mercy*, the works spiritual mercy and *Mathew 25*.

This is the first time these texts became available in English, and the English version was intended for the benefit of the laity so that it should be properly understood and appreciated.

The archbishop gave it as wide a circulation as he possibly could.

Copies were multiplied and dispensed in various forms, and the primate [archbishop] ‘sent them in small pagyantes to the common people to lerne it and knowe it; of whiche many a copy be in England.’ So wrote someone in the fifteenth century. The word ‘pagantes’ opens out a very interesting field of speculation. It is the name applied to the miracle plays which were once so popular and so common. Was the North of England indebted to Thoresby for the introduction of these instructive, yet somewhat profane, representations? It is very probable indeed that he would press them into his service to arrest the attention of the wayfarers in the streets, and please the eyes and ears of the unlettered crowd. (Rainon, 470)

Thoresby writing or commissioning *The Last Judgment* would explain why the pageant has so little difference between *Mathew 25* and the Creed. Rather than a play as known today, created by an author from their own ideas, *The Last Judgment* would be a dramatic sermon written by the bishop. (Rainon 471) Arranging the presentation of the sermons in the streets would have been the next step.

Lucy Toulmen Smith, using analysis of poetic language and meter, dates the writing of the Corpus Christi plays to approximately 1350 (xiv). Smith quotes Davies’ “Extracts from Municipal Records of York” that in 1394 the council ordered that the pageants should play at the places as appointed “in ‘old’ times” (230). The play seems to have developed in

approximately twenty-five years or less – between the plague what Smith refers to as “old” times.

The four pageants and by extrapolation the whole Corpus Christi play were not written by the laity of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The church through theatre was moving into the streets to reach more people. The Corpus Christi play began with pageants written by or for Archbishop Thoresby to teach the basic precepts of the church. This teaching method, successful and popular, grew. The precepts taught became popular in other art forms – painting, sculpture, stained glass, tapestry and so on. The stories are the ones everyone knows or think they know from the Bible.

If original parts of the play were written and staged under control of Archbishop Thoresby, possibly by him personally, then this would explain some puzzling facts. To begin, it might give a reason for the lack of character development; the Church would not want the Church’s view of theology changed. Pageants with key theological points (like The Creation, The Last Judgment) changed little over 200 years. Pageants of less serious subjects (like Noah and the Flood) could have more developed characters like Mrs. Noah. Faithfulness to theology was still required. The play was controlled by the guilds, and the guilds were supervised by the city council. The city council saw that the plays did not offend the Church. Each year the pageants of the Corpus Christi Play started around the route and the audience at the first station included the Town Clerk who made notes in the one master book of all the pageants. No substantial changes to the text seem to have been made for the almost two hundred years that the play ran.

Elizabeth I ascended the throne in 1558. Under Elizabeth I, religion in England was being forced by a few to divide between the traditional catholic customs and beliefs and the

new protestant reformation changes. The last production of the Corpus Christi Play was in 1569. Guild members were optimistic about the prospect of a production in 1570.

Events in the fall of that year put a stop to this optimism. Several new protestant reforms pushed leaders of Yorkshire's traditionalist majority to protest. The goal of this protest was not treason but instead an effort to keep religion unchanged. Unfortunately with Spain causing trouble on the continent and Mary, Queen of Scots, a focus of rebellion in the north, Elizabeth I had no choice but to take it seriously. After the rebellion was settled, hundreds of participants were hung. No matter how conservative the city of York was, temporarily at least, it needed to look compliant with Elizabeth's new policies. The bible was now legally available in its entirety in English for the first time. The reformers policy with artwork of any kind was that it distracted people from the all important reason they were worshipping – to learn God's word directly from the Bible. No errors could creep in from tradition.

The plays were created to fill the need to instruct the ways of the Church. Once the Church began teaching entirely in English, the plays were no longer needed.

APPENDIX A:

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE IN ENGLAND FROM 1066 to 1600

LANGUAGE FROM 1066 TO 1600

During the period from 1066 to 1600 England had not one language but three; Latin, French, and English.

Latin was the language of the Roman Catholic Church. The importance of the Roman Catholic Church to the people in medieval England is hard for modern society to understand. There was no such thing as separation of church and state. The sacraments of the church regulated birth, morality, marriage, entering the church, and death. Church schools taught reading, writing, mathematics, and music with the view of training more priests. All this was done in Latin. The Roman Empire might have collapsed, but the church kept the language. Because of this it could communicate with its brethren all over the world no matter what their native language. Latin served as the written language for the Christian world. It had a standardized spelling which both English and French hadn't settled on yet. By reading and writing Latin one could communicate with educated people virtually anywhere.

This desire to communicate led to a publishing system of sorts. Monasteries, abbeys, nunneries could make a "cash crop" for barter or sale by copying out more books than their group needed for use within the order. Some were elaborate presentation pieces; valuable then and astronomically so now if it has lasted to this day, most were utilitarian meant for everyday use. The copyists preserved and passed on not only church history and doctrine but secular history and knowledge as well.

Latin was always a second language. The first language of the upper classes in England was the dialect known as Anglo-Norman French. This was the language brought by William the Conqueror (1066). By successful war and judicious marriage the country ruled by the

English kings grew until its largest point under Henry II. England was the smallest, most northerly province of a large French speaking country. Royalty, the upper classes, and anyone who was upwardly mobile spoke French. English was the language of the common people; the ordinary workers and folk of both town and country of its northerly provinces.

What secular books there were, were usually in French. Only the upper class had the money to buy them and the skill to read them. A person could read the book privately, but being able to read well to an audience was a much appreciated skill.

Poetry was a very important skill for both the upper and lower classes. Traditional songs and stories were often in alliterative poetry and or rhyme to aid in memorization and retention. The tales such as King Arthur, Robin Hood, and Renard The Fox, were old long before they were written down. The telling of these tales was a regular feature of long winter evenings. Minstrels (traveling performers) brought new songs, and composed poems on current events in the locality on the spur of the moment similar to some “rappers” today.

The English gradually lost control of many French possessions making the island of England and its language more important. The kings began to learn English. Richard I (The Lion Heart) spoke no English at all; Edward I [1272-1307] spoke English as well as French. The single most horrific natural disaster of the middle ages, possibly all time happened in 1349. Now known as Bubonic plague, then it was known as the Great Plague. Between one-third and one-half of the population of England died. Twelve years later, 1361, there was another outbreak taking a further ten percent. Edward III [1327-1377] proclaimed English was to be spoken in the law courts [1362] of the realm on the ground that the French language was “much unknown in the said realm” (Carter and Mears 227). The king commanded that “all pleas which shall be pleaded in any courts wherever should be

‘pleaded, answered, debated and judged’ in English, should be entered on the rolls in Latin” (Carter and Mears 226). This ruling was not because the authorities wanted to change how things were done, instead it was because there were no longer enough French speakers to do it the old way. For better or worse, England was down to one secular language for the whole country.

APPENDIX B:

THE MANUSCRIPT OF THE CORPUS CHRISTI PLAY OF YORK

THE MANUSCRIPT OF THE CORPUS CHRISTI PLAY

Performing plays on the feast of Corpus Christi was commonly done in numerous English towns (London, Townley, Coventry, and Chester among others). The York collection stands out for its completeness. Other towns have only some of their plays; often these plays are in fragments. Some have only a list of the titles or other references in the city records with no scripts at all. York has virtually the complete set of their scripts.

In the days before printing, each Guild would have one or more hand written copies of their 'play'. From this copy each actor's speeches with just enough of the previous speech to cue them into their part were written out. Paying for copying was expensive so there were few complete scripts. The 'corporation', the organization of the heads of the guilds of York, paid to have a master copy made of the plays of all the guilds. Each year a clerk sat with the book outside the priory of Holy Trinity at Micklegate. The first performance of each play was given there each year and checked with the master copy to assure that the play registered was the play produced. As far as is known this was the only copy of each the plays. There is some question as to whether the book was kept at Holy Trinity Priory or if it was kept by a city official or office. The last official usage was at the last performance of the plays in 1569. The book, along with the copies of each pageant belonging to the guild responsible for producing it, was supposed to be turned over to the Archbishop's office. They were to be rewritten according to Protestantism under Elizabeth I so they could be produced again. If the book had been turned over, most likely it would not have come down to the present day. In 1572 the scripts of another popular York play, *the Pater Noster play*, were turned in for the same sort of reworking and never seen again. Among the guild scripts the only one surviving is the play of *Doubting Thomas* produced by the scriveners.

The book of York Mystery Plays next turns up as 1695 as belonging to H. Fairfax. Next it was given to Ralph Thoresby. Described as ‘a folio volume written upon vellum of Old English Poetry, very curious,’ when Mr. Thoresby’s books were sold in 1764, it was sold to Horace Walpole for one pound, one schilling. It changed hands several more times, for ever increasing amounts of money, until coming to rest in the library of Lord Ashburnham. Over the middle eighteen hundreds various scholars had realized what it was and that it was a historically important work but no one had done anything about it.

Lucy Toulman Smith first learned of it in a French article on the mysteries of the Old Testament. Miss Smith edited the first publication of the plays, which came out in 1885. This book was virtually the only work on the play until the 1960’s. Newer books have some additional information but her book, with its glossary and introduction is still the best source on *The Corpus Christi Play of York*. She was uniquely qualified for this work. Fluent in Latin and French, she had done extensive work with French and English medieval poetry. Her father was a noted scholar whose major area of research was English guilds, including those of York. Miss Smith acted as his assistant, giving her access to the only contemporary record of the play beyond the play book.

An area in which Miss Smith did not have experience was theatrical production (As opposed to familiarity with Shakespearean plays as written poetry). To quote her “I have supplied the titles, and have collected the persons of the plays, added a marginal analysis, a few stage directions, and the indications of scenes”. Her titles and character lists are logical, and the marginal analysis is helpful. The stage and scene directions are not, they confuse those who have not actually read the play. Many assume they are a series of full length plays instead of scenes.

The Corpus Christi Play has been misunderstood because of the addition of the “s” making it plural and the interpretation of each section as a play. They are not plays but a series of scenes making one play. Their production on 48 stages all over the town and extending over the whole day (see sections on the production and the route) was strange to the point of impossibility to the Victorians and to scholars to this day. To the audiences and the scholars a play was three to four hours long, divided into four or five acts and performed on a large stage with realistic, box sets. Making the Corpus Christi Play fit this template was impossible. Scholars of the time went to incredible lengths trying. Directors realize now that audiences will watch short scenes acted on small areas with only minimal blocking.



Figure 1: The Shambles in York, England

APPENDIX C:
STAGING OF THE PLAY

THE STAGING OF THE PLAYS

As the second largest city in England and the “alternate “ capital of the country, York had a huge audience for the Corpus Christi Play; the population of the city plus friends, relatives and business associates from as far away as the Low Countries now known as Belgium and the Netherlands. Royalty and other notables’ timed their visits so they could attend. The play was a major showpiece of the city demonstrating wealth, public spirit and piety of the residents. A modern analogy would be The New Years Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena, California.

York is at the junction of two river valleys and surrounded by a wall. Little open space remains within the walls. Unlike many continental cities York has no large city square where crowds can gather. The streets are narrow with sharp corners and steep hills.

York met these challenges for reaching a large gathering by taking the play to the audience. Each section or pageant of the play had its own portable stage. These “pageants” were expensive custom built vehicles. Commissioned by each guild for their section of the play also known as a pageant. Stored in warehouses for the rest of the year they represented major financial outlays. Because of this they rated frequent mention in guild records. From these records scholars have information on the cost and building materials of some of the wagons but no one left any pictures, designs, or verbal descriptions of a York Pageant. What they looked like is purely conjecture.

Only slightly more is known about the pageants of the other cities in northern England.

Nearly every article written about the Corpus Christi Play describes the pageant wagons.

The descriptions say they were two stories with the acting done on the top story. The bottom one was used as a dressing room. The wagons were close to ten feet across and fifteen to twenty feet long. Elaborate equipment was built into them such as cranes, higher platforms and trap doors for Hells mouth.

These authors are deducing all of this from two pieces of information dating from thirty to sixty years after the plays ceased. The first is a paragraph in a book, *Breviary*, by David Rogers.

Rogers' father had been Archdeacon of Chester until his death fifteen years before his son's book was written. First out in 1609, the book had a section on the Chester Corpus Christi play. Rogers wrote the book from observations made by his father about his father's early years. Rogers had not seen the play and as a good protestant was not sympathetic to the idea of depicting God on the stage. How accurate is his information? Lee (22)

Flemish artist Pieter Brueghal painted the Village Festival in honor of St. Hubert and St. Anthon. Dated 1635, among other amusements the picture contained a stage being made ready for a play. Does this picture fifty years later and from another country have anything to do with any pageant wagon? Fitzwilliam Museum: Cambridge, UK.

What did ordinary wagons look like in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries?

There were very few four wheeled wagons in use at that time. People traveled by foot and horseback. Freight was moved by pack horse and two wheeled cart. The roads between towns were so bad pack horses were preferred because they were less likely to get stuck.

Two wheel carts were preferred, over four wheel wagons, because they were easier to turn and stop. Wheelwrights were just developing the mechanics to turn the front wheels under the body of the wagon. This advance was not in use until the eighteenth century. The

technology of the pageants was the most modern means of heavy transportation. (Woolgar 182).

APPENDIX D:
ROUTE OF THE PLAY

ROUTE OF THE PLAYS

With the exception of having the Registrar book there is more information about the route of the pageant wagons took thru the city of York than about any other facet of the York Corpus Christi Play. Pageant wagons were hauled around York by crews of men, not teams of horses. It was easier to have crews both before and behind for better control on York's hills. Crews worked for the honor of being part of the production and free beer. Beer for the crew is a major expense in the records.

The medieval builder expected traffic to flow into town in the morning for marketing, work and so on. In the late afternoon traffic flowed back out. Most people were on foot or horseback. Two-way vehicular traffic was so rare it was not considered necessary to plan for it. The only bridge across the Ouse River was only wide enough for a single wheeled vehicle at a time. The pageant wagons had to cross this bridge. These restrictions dictated which streets could be used.

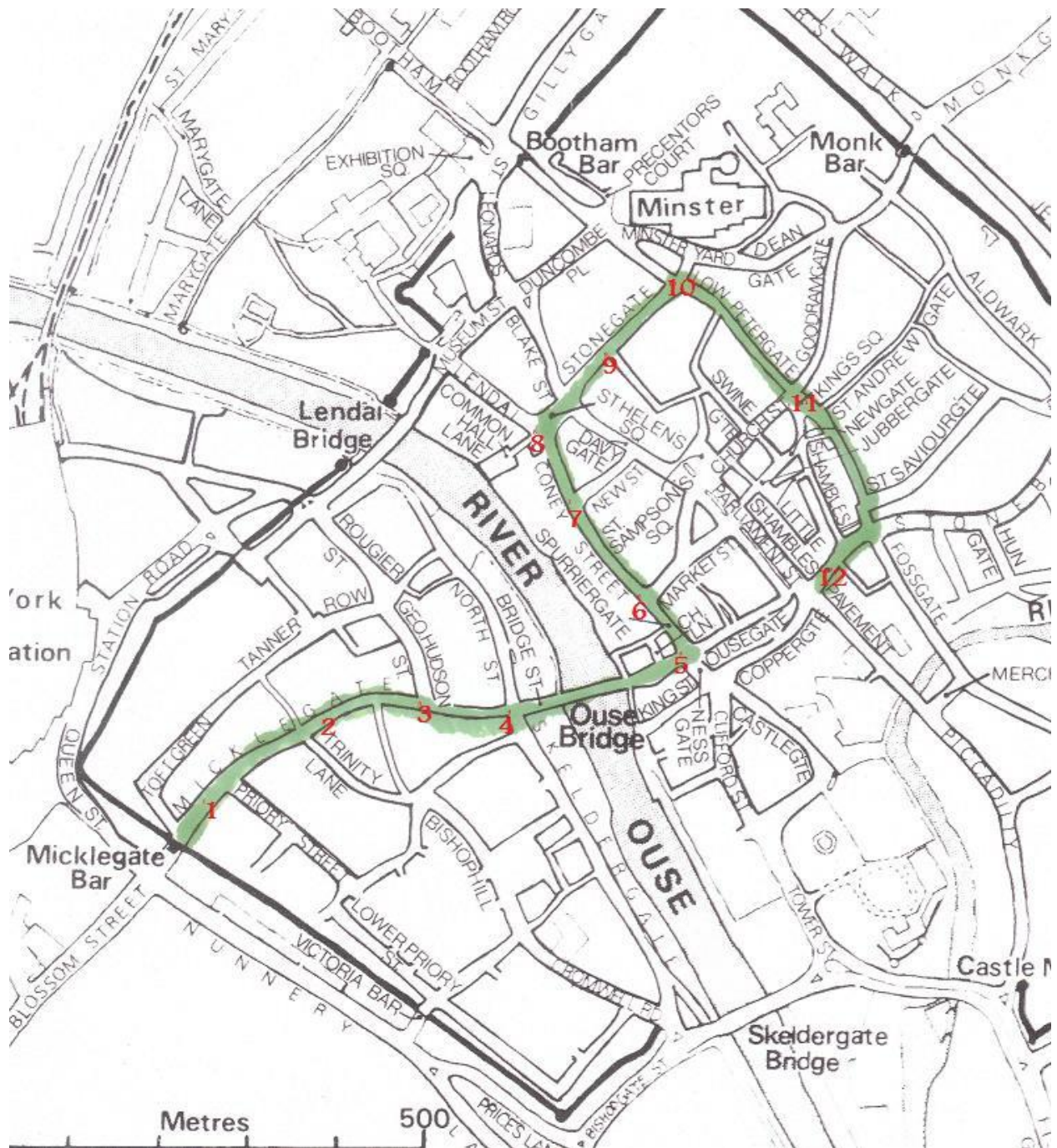


Figure 2: Map of York circa 1400

The Route of The Plays: A List of locations

As given in Davies in 1399. Smith (xxii)

(numbers correspond to those in Figure 2)

1. the gates of Holy Trinity Priory, Micklegate
2. Robert Harpham's door
3. John de Gyseburne's door
4. Skeldergate and North Street
5. The Castlegate end of Coney Street
6. The end of Jubbergate in Coney Street
7. Henry Wyman's door in Coney Street
8. The end of Coney Street next to the Guildhall
9. Adam del Brigg's door
10. the Minster Gates
11. the end of Girdlegate in Petergate
12. the Pavement

The players representing the Barkers Guild, who acted the plays *The Creation of Heaven and Earth* and *The Fall of Lucifer*, presented the first performance of the day outside Station One; Holy Trinity priory. The priory was the home of prosperous Benedictine order and the parish church for the area. Because it was a parish church the church survived Henry VIII 's dissolving of the monasteries

. The Common Clerk, official representative of the City Council, was stationed in front to check the performed play against the script (see manuscript section) in the register. Stations two through seven paid a fee to the city for the privilege of having the pageant

wagons stop opposite their address. These householders then built bleachers in front and charged for the seating. Seats at the windows of were prime locations.



Figure 3: Holy Trinity Church



Figure 4: Stations Two and Three

This photo was taken from the first station in front of the priory. Station two was before the curve and Station three just past the curve on this road. The hill must have added to the problems of controlling the moving of the pageant wagons. This picture also gives an idea of the distances between stations.

Station Eight, the guildhall, was seating favored by the guild officers. That might have been because those seats were free of charge for these officers. Station nine was about half way between the Guildhall and Yorkminster. Station ten, in front of the Minster, had seating for the church dignitaries. Station twelve, the Pavement (the largest open area in York) had special areas for city officials and important guests of the city. Standing room was free.

This picture, taken in 1908, shows Stonegate. Station nine was approximately where the wagon is parked on the left side of the picture. The width of the street in relation to the width of the one horse wagon shows the narrowness of Stonegate, considered a wide and busy street in old York.

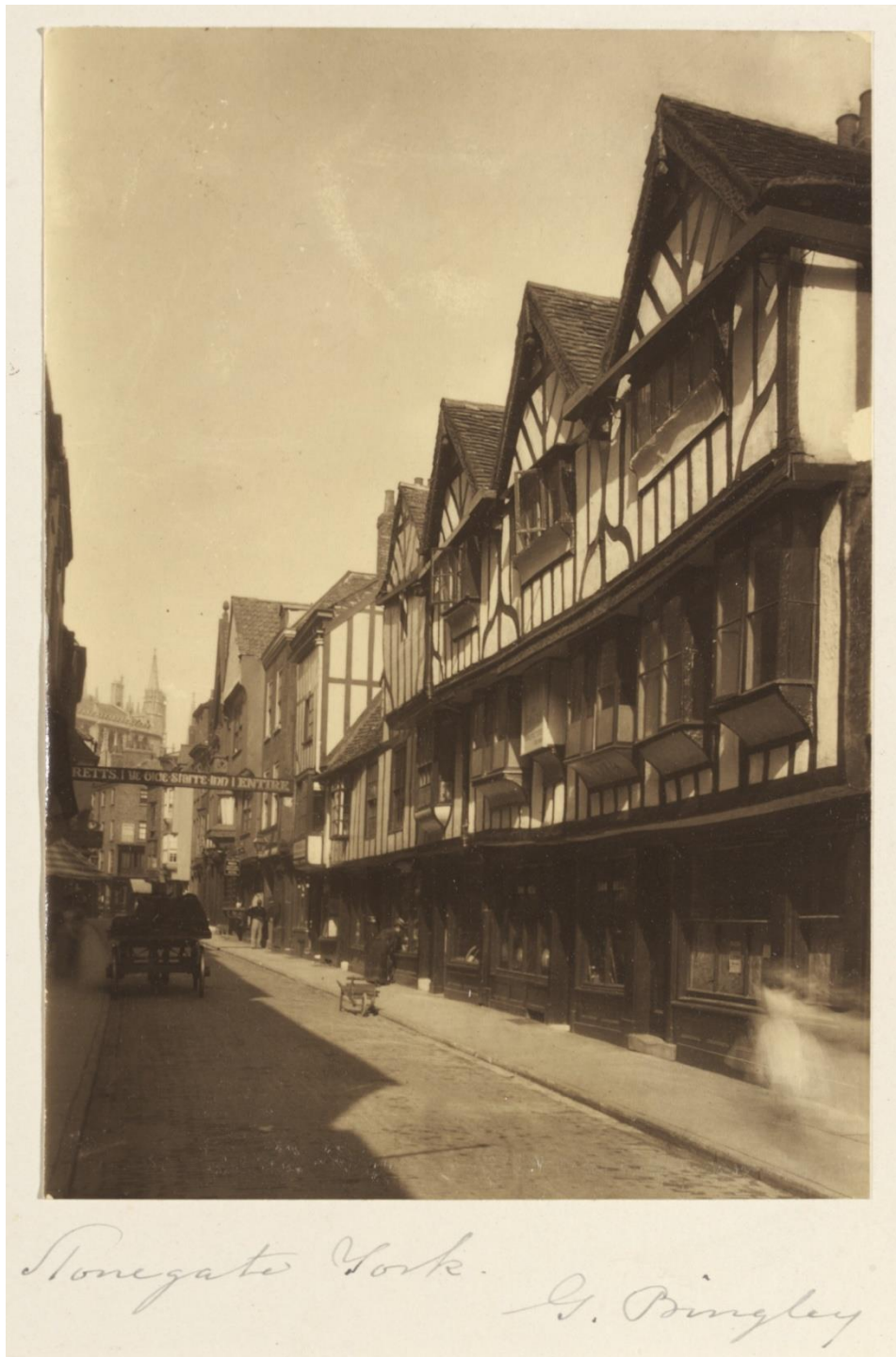


Figure 5: Stonegate Street in York circa 1910



Figure 6: South side of York Minster Cathedral circa 1910

Yorkminster Cathedral

The pageant wagon when playing at Station ten, in front of the Cathedral, parked where the cameraman stood to take this picture. The seating was against the Cathedral.

Researching the addresses ____ has established that the wagons were facing out with the back of the stage to the address across the street from the address selling seating.

After Mass at 4:30 A.M. on Corpus Christi day the first pageant, on its wagon, moved on to the first station. As each pageant finished it would move on to the next station. The next pageant would move into the vacated spot and on around the route. Plays could be as short

as 10 minutes or as long as 45 minutes. The total number of plays was somewhere around 50, it varied according to what guilds had the money to produce the plays that year. Also they occasionally combined plays to shorten running time and/or save money.

One of the reasons the feast of Corpus Christi was popular as a date for the play was it was one of the longest days of the year. With the first pageant of the day at dawn, the last pageant would take place sometime after midnight. This sounds strenuous to the point of inhumanity until one realizes it would have been different groups of players. They would play their show 12 times, each about 1/2 hour long, and be home in time for lunch. These players could have then enjoyed the other shows or the other holiday entertainments for the rest of the day. The players whose show ended after midnight had not started playing until about 6:00 PM.

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