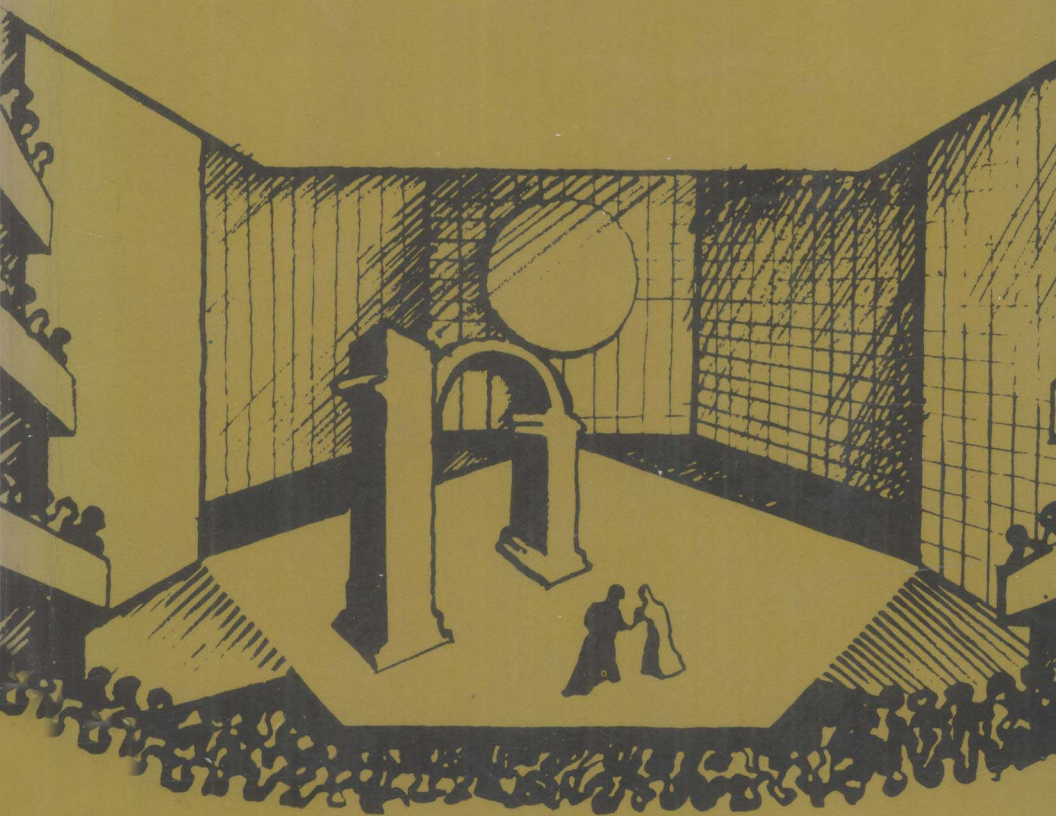


English Drama

A Critical Introduction

Gāmini Salgādo



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We transport you into a world of intrigue and illusion . . .clowns, if you like, murderers — we can do you ghosts and battles, on the skirmish level, heroes, villains, tormented lovers — set pieces in the poetic vein; we can do you rapiers or rape or both, by all means, faithless wives and ravished virgins — flagrante delicto at a price, but that comes under realism for which there are special terms. Getting warm, am I ?

Tom Stoppard: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead.

Preface

This book tries to give an account of drama in England from its medieval beginnings to the early nineteen-seventies. The emphasis is mainly on dramatic texts, for several reasons. The physical conditions of the English theatre in its greatest period called upon language to serve functions discharged by other means in later theatres — settings, lighting, the use of actresses as well as actors and so on. Hence many dramatic texts are immensely rich in their verbal texture. The text is also the most stable element in that transient whole which is our experience of a play. And finally, texts lend themselves more easily to written commentary because in most cases they, rather than performances, form the common experience shared by reader and writer.

I have however, constantly tried to bear in mind that dramatic texts are not very usefully discussed outside the context of performance. In talking of individual plays I have made some attempt to relate them not only to that imagined theatre of the mind without which no rewarding reading of a play is possible, but also to the specific theatres for which they were designed. And because theatre, the most social of art forms, has a peculiarly intimate relation to the society within which it flowers or fades, I have paid attention to that society, usually in the specific form of particular audiences.

The discussion of individual plays has been made as detailed as space allowed and plot summary conscientiously pared down to the intelligible minimum, as my intention has been to direct or redirect attention to the plays rather than provide a substitute for them. I have been guided by the principle that plays chosen for discussion should be of intrinsic rather than historical interest, though the distinction is not always as clear as it ought to be. Shakespeare has not received extended discussion for fairly obvious reasons, though the reader will sense his presence everywhere in the book, as it is everywhere in English drama, being not so much a figure in that drama as one of its conditions.

Perhaps it needs to be added that I have no particular theory about the relationship of theatre to society except that it has been demonstrably different at different periods. Nor have I a general theory of the development of drama or other magic key to unlock all mysteries.

A book taking in as wide a span as this one and attempting to touch on several different related topics is even more indebted to the work of others than is usually the case. It would be quite hopeless to attempt acknowledgement of all debts, even if I were consciously aware of them. Specific references are given in footnotes, which I have used sparingly. The very selective bibliography records my principal

sources of information, ideas and productive disagreement.

Sarah Cohen was cheerfully encouraging when I first began work on this book and her subsequent characteristic blend of quiet patience and gentle prodding was one of the chief factors in its completion. Another was the speed, efficiency and conscientiousness with which Melba Chapman transformed a messy manuscript into an intelligible typescript. To both my heartfelt thanks.

Exeter, 18 January, 1980

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Medieval Drama

We have a natural tendency to flatten out the past, and the further we move back in time the flatter we make it. We imagine the past as less chaotic than the present, its people and their activities as less various and surprising than our own. Naturally, because no matter how great our imaginative awareness may be, *we* can only fully respond to the present; only the here and now can be 'felt in the blood and felt along the heart' by *us*. But two points are worth making here, both shatteringly obvious and therefore often forgotten. The first is that every bit of the past was the present to a large group of people and with knowledge, sympathy and imagination we can still have access to it, if only a limited access — the limits being set by the accidents of history and our individual capacities. The second point is that such informed frequentation of the past is, or can be, an important part of our response to the present, can quite literally be part of our own sense of what it is to be alive here and now. Just as each of us would be immeasurably poorer and more confused without our individual memories, so we are diminished to the extent that we are cut off, or cut ourselves off, from the richness and variety of the past.

With these considerations in mind, we may begin our study of English drama by noting the variety of dramatic forms which go under the general rubric of 'medieval drama' and the scope and extent of the theatrical traditions within which it flourished. Too often medieval drama is either the subject of specialized scholarly study or tends to be discussed in relation to the Elizabethan drama which followed it, as if the importance of the earlier drama is solely due to its foreshadowing of greater things to come. As we shall see, the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is full of splendour and spectacle and its greatest achievements have never been surpassed before or since. But it is as well to state here simply and clearly that this chapter is based on the conviction that if the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama had never existed, the drama of the medieval period would still be what it undoubtedly is, one of the great achievements of the European theatre.

Drama and Liturgy

But it is time we made some necessary distinctions and provided some sort of framework within which generalizations can find substance and support. As noted above, many different kinds of theatrical and quasi-theatrical offering are loosely labelled 'medieval drama'. Like everything else in the Middle Ages, all these dramatic forms were related to the Church and its activities, but the nature and extent of the relation varied according to the forms in question. Logically as well as chronologically, the earliest form of medieval 'drama' was that of the church ritual

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itself. Up till about the last quarter of the tenth century, the only dramatic spectacles generally seen in England (apart from the pre-Christian folk rituals and the folk plays derived from them such as the mummers' play of St. George) were connected with the services of the various festivals of the Christian year. Before the Reformation England was of course part of the universal Catholic Church, sharing with the rest of European Christendom a common creed, ritual and language. The Catholic Mass was inherently dramatic in the ordinary sense of the word, incorporating many elements associated with theatrical representation — a set text, 'distancing' from everyday discourse through chant and the use of a 'sacred' language, stylized movement, costumes and properties and so on. An influential work by a German bishop of the early ninth century explicitly interpreted the Mass as a symbolic drama of salvation centred on the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Even more 'dramatic' were the gospel stories associated with the various seasons of the Church's year, notably the great festivals of Easter and Christmas. These gave rise to the so-called *tropes* or embellishments of the liturgical text through mime, chant and music. The earliest and most celebrated of these is the *Quem Quaeritis* ('whom do you seek?') trope performed at Eastertide, of which over 400 versions from all over Europe are extant. It tells the story of the meeting between the angels and the three Marys at the empty tomb on Easter morning. The English version, dating from the last quarter of the tenth century is found in the *Regularis Concordia* of Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester. It is worth quoting at some length not only for its historical interest but because of the clearly defined impulse towards dramatic representation behind it. While the third lesson is being chanted,

let four brothers vest themselves. Let one of them, vested in an alb (a long white robe) enter as if to take part in the service and approach the place where the sepulchre is and sit there quietly with a palm in his hand. While the third respond is chanted, let the other three follow bearing censers with incense in their hands and, with hesitating steps as if seeking something, let them come to the place of the sepulchre. *These things are done in imitation of the angel seated within the tomb and the women coming with spices to anoint the body of Jesus.* (my italics)

The words I have emphasized make the mimetic intention quite plain. The emotion of the Congregation is heightened by this dramatic enhancement of the liturgical occasion. We note that the priests take on the roles of the women and the angels, and that the vestments function as theatrical costumes in the same way that the palm becomes a theatrical property. There is not much dialogue for this little play (none at all in the gospels) and all of it is in Latin, but the occasion and the dramatic action would doubtless have made it moving even for the large majority of the audience of all classes who were ignorant of Latin. 'Whom seek ye in the the tomb, O followers of Christ?' asks the angel, to whom the women reply 'Jesus of Nazareth the crucified, O dweller in heaven'. The angel tells them: 'He is not here, he has risen, even as he foretold. Go, announce that he has risen from the dead'. At this the three women turn to the choir and chant 'Alleluia, the Lord has risen'. The angel, still seated, recalls the women to show that the cross, standing for Christ

himself, is missing leaving only the cloth in which it was wrapped. 'Come and see the place where the Lord was laid' he chants. The women spread out the cloth to show the world that Christ is risen and sing 'The Lord has risen from the tomb' and lay the cloth on the altar. The priest then leads the choir and congregation in the *Te Deum* to the triumphant peal of the church bells.

The Easter trope is a representative specimen of the liturgical drama. Clearly recognizable as a piece of Church ritual shaped into dramatic form it is still, as the ending shows, closely linked to the over-arching religious occasion within which it occurs and in terms of which it acquires significance in the minds of the congregation. As time went on the dramatic elements of the episode were developed and elaborated through the addition of fresh characters and scenes. The apostles Peter and John also come to the tomb and the Marys buy ointment from a spice-vendor, a total stranger to the Biblical version. There are also, as we might expect, similar playlets associated with other Church festivals such as the Nativity plays at Christmas. But while the liturgical drama undoubtedly catered to the taste for dramatic spectacle in the congregation, it is unlikely that it developed into the great cyclical dramas, sometimes called mystery or miracle plays whose span of action covered nothing less than all human time, from the Creation to the Last Judgement. There are several reasons for doubting that the mystery cycles developed by some process of accumulation from the liturgical drama just described.¹

The Miracle Plays

The liturgical drama eventually came to be performed in the vernacular, often outside the church itself. But neither of these factors could have helped to expand that drama into the mystery cycles because the liturgical drama *always* remained tied to the specific festivals with which it was associated, being, as we have seen, a heightening of the Church ritual, not an integral part of it, and deriving its significance entirely from that ritual. This means first that particular playlets would have been performed *only* at those periods of the Church year appropriate to them and second that the number of such playlets would be comparatively small. And the surviving body of liturgical drama (fairly full where the Continent is concerned though depleted in England by Reformation ardour) suggest that most communities possessed only one or two such 'occasional' plays, certainly nothing approaching the breadth and grandeur of the cycle drama. We must look elsewhere for the origin of the latter.

In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council approved the doctrine of Transubstantiation whereby Christ in His Real Presence was believed to be in the consecrated bread and wine of the Holy Sacrament. Fifty years later in 1264, Pope Urban IV instituted the feast of Corpus Christi as a public celebration of God's greatest gift, the blood and body of his son to redeem man's sins. Though the Church commemorated the Holy Sacrament on the day of the Last Supper (Maundy

¹ What follows is mainly a summary of the argument developed and substantiated with skill, insight and scholarship by V.A. Kolve in *The Play called Corpus Christi* (London, 1966).

Thursday), the date set aside for the public celebrations of the feast of Corpus Christi varied from 23 May to 24 June. Thus, from the very beginning, the feast of Corpus Christi was not tied to the Church's calendar in the sense that other great religious occasions were; and we may note that the time of year chosen was well suited to outdoor celebrations in Europe.

Urban IV's death prevented the implementation of the feast until 1311, when Clement V ordered its adoption. One of the principal features of the feast was the procession of the Host, still commemorated in some parts of Catholic Europe. This was a visible demonstration of the community's faith in the capacity of the Eucharist to perform miracles and reached its climax when the priest held the Blessed Sacrament on high so that all the people could see it. There were probably dramatic renderings of various miracles associated with the Eucharist.

But the blood and body of Christ was not simply the instrument of local and temporal miracles, however spectacular. It was also, as the Church repeatedly stressed, the supreme and eternal gift of God to man. It put the faithful in mind of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. In themselves these were events to be contemplated with shame and sorrow rather than rejoicing *unless* they could be linked with the Resurrection which in turn looked forward to the Last Judgement and back to the Creation and the Fall. Thus the injunction to *celebrate* the feast of Corpus Christi led naturally to a consideration of the whole nature and testing of man and the impulse to do this in dramatic terms probably lies behind the creation of the cyclical drama which is the crowning glory of the medieval theatre. The fact that it took all creation as theme and subject meant that this drama could develop almost indefinitely and absorb almost anything; but the fact that its shape and structure were determined by a clearly defined pattern of significance (in which the passion of Christ was central) made it capable of handling this vast and heterogeneous body of material with coherence and authority.

Neither of the two terms by which the medieval cycle drama is known are particularly appropriate. The term 'miracle' was originally applied to plays dealing with the lives of saints while any play with a Biblical subject was called a 'mystère', a sense which the English term can retain only with difficulty, in competition with the more usual meanings of the word. We need to bear in mind constantly that while individual plays or scenes from the cycles can be and have been performed with great success, this drama was always conceived as an all-encompassing whole and attains its true stature and significance only in relation to the cyclic structure which informs it. This does not of course mean that any given cycle sprang up whole and complete from the beginning, but that it was always capable of accommodating additions within the overall structure.

The English cycle drama

The ravages of reforming zeal saw to it that most of the Corpus Christi plays in England (they continued to be called by this name even when they were performed at other times, such as Whitsun) were destroyed. It is probable that every community of any size in medieval England had its own Corpus Christi play. Though there is no firm documentary evidence for the existence of such plays in England

before 1375, references to the plays as well-established suggest that this drama may have existed from fifty years or so earlier. Four complete English cycle-texts have survived, as well as a complete list of 36 or 38 plays constituting yet another cycle. The Chester cycle, dating from about 1375, contains 24 plays, the York cycle has twice that number, the Wakefield cycle (sometimes called the Towneley cycle after a former owner of the unique surviving manuscript) 32 plays and the N-town cycle 42 plays. 'N' may stand for *nomen* or name. The banns for the play contain the following words:

A-Sunday next if that us may
At six of the bell we 'gin our play
In N-town

— the actual name of the town would have been filled in according to the locality. One play each survives from the cycles of Norwich and Newcastle-upon-Tyne and there are also some single plays which may or may not have been part of cycles. There is also a trilogy in Cornish dealing with the Creation, the Passion and the Resurrection. Most of the texts are in single manuscripts often much later than the period when the plays were originally performed. This is all that has survived of a drama which was popular throughout England and Scotland for two centuries and more.

All the surviving cycles contain plays dealing with the central myths of the Christian view of man and human history within its cosmic setting. Beginning with the fall of Lucifer we move from the Creation to the primal murder of Abel by Cain and Noah's Flood. Then there is the story of Abraham and Isaac, the Nativity and the raising of Lazarus. The cycles come to one kind of climax with the Passion and the Resurrection and reach their triumphant close with Doomsday.

Some of the cycles also contain plays dealing with the story of Moses, the baptism of Christ, the temptation in the wilderness and the assumption and coronation of the Virgin Mary. Though certain plays (such as those in the Towneley cycle attributed to the so-called Wakefield Master) have the hallmark of a single author, the cycles are generally of composite authorship over a period of time which may have been as much as fifty years. Like the great medieval cathedrals, the cycle drama has a vaster business in hand than the expression of an individual personality and it looks on human time under the aspect of eternity.

The authors of this drama are unknown to us, though they were members of the clergy. In creating this drama their selection from the vast body of material provided by the Old and New Testaments was guided not so much by individual preference for the most obviously dramatic material as by a tradition of commentary and interpretation by the early fathers of the Church which was the received orthodoxy, shared by the clergy and congregation alike. Central to this received teaching was the conception of the three visitations of God, the first as creator of man, then as redeemer and finally as judge of man. The many parallels between Adam and Christ (the second Adam as St Paul termed him) provided links between the Creation, the Fall and the Incarnation, while the Fall itself presupposed some inveterate malice towards God and his Creation on the part of the serpent which in turns suggested the revolt and fall of Lucifer. Thus we can

discern the basic shape of the cycle drama as given and available to the men who wrote and witnessed it; the drama derives its authority from an independent tradition of significance.

Within this basic structure, the choice of episodes from the Old Testament (relatively few common to all the surviving cycles, considering the wealth of material available) was governed by the well established tradition of figural interpretation. Incidents from the Old Testament were seen as both true in themselves *and* as prefiguring later events recorded in the New Testament. The tradition had the powerful sanction of Christ's own practice of referring to his own situation in terms of parallels drawn from the earlier scriptures. Since the central focus of the Corpus Christi feast was Christ's sacrifice, the drama chose those events from the Old Testament which particularly related to that sacrifice. Thus the blood of Abel prefigured the blood of Christ, Noah saving his family from the flood was an image of Christ saving the whole human family from the destruction of hell, Abraham offering Isaac as a sacrifice imaged the greater sacrifice of himself by Christ. But the later event was not merely a repetition of the earlier but a further development of it. Abel's blood cried out for vengeance, Christ's was offered for mercy, Abraham did not finally have to lose his son but the Son of Man was sacrificed, and so on. The significance of the dramatic enactment lies in a relationship between an event and its analogue. Both were believed in as true and important but in the difference between them lay the meaning of the drama. The relationships are not always made explicit in the plays themselves, nor need they have been, since they were part of the common outlook behind medieval sermons, stained glass windows and sculpture. They dramatized the movement from justice to mercy, from Law to Love.

It is evident therefore that this drama is not a collection of miscellaneous bits and pieces haphazardly put together by enthusiastic but inept or unsophisticated amateurs. We may note its stark realism, or its earthy humour, its occasional lyric beauty and poignant austerity of utterance. All these are present and have been justly praised. But we should never forget that they exist within a structure as solid, shapely and spectacular as that of the great medieval cathedrals. We should no more think of being patronizing or condescending about the cycle drama of the Middle Ages than we would about Salisbury spire.

The cycle drama as theatre

Modern revivals, now a regular part of the theatrical scene in many parts of England, have demonstrated that the medieval drama still has the power to interest and move large numbers of people most of whom no longer share the world outlook which gave rise to it. The power and authority of the drama is most fully revealed when it is played in conditions as near as may be to those for which it was originally produced.

As has been suggested, the cycle drama was intended from the outset for outdoor performance. The staging of different plays within the cycle became the responsibility of one or other of the great craft guilds, each of which had its own patron saint. Sometimes, though not invariably, a particular guild would choose a

play especially appropriate to it, as when the Shipwrights undertook the story of the ark or the Butchers staged the crucifixion. The ties between the guilds and the Church were very close (some guilds were not craft guilds but purely religious associations) but only the guilds had the personnel, resources and organization capable of handling the complicated and expensive business of performing these plays regularly.

There were two main styles of presentation, both of them with an extensive tradition of European development behind them by the time they arrived in England late in the fourteenth century. They are referred to under different names by various scholars. Here, they will be called 'place-and-scaffold' and 'pageant waggon' staging.

'Place-and-scaffold' staging was the more ambitious and elaborate of the two. Basically it consists of raised scaffolds arranged round a bare area or 'place' (*platea*). Each of the scaffolds represented a particular locality — Paradise, the Mount of Olives, the house of Simon the Leper, or whatever the particular action required — and had a suitably decorated stage. The locations could be symbolic — the abode of Lust for instance, or the World itself — as well as realistic. The action took place between these particular locations and the unlocalized 'place' in front of them. The audience stood, or occupied specially erected stands in the surrounding area. Actors in the unlocalized area were never far from the audience and would sometimes move among them, as when the Messenger in the N-Town Trial of Christ is instructed by stage directions to

come into the place running and crying 'Tidings! Tidings!' and so round about the place, 'Jesus of Nazareth is taken! Jesus of Nazareth is taken!'

There were many dramatic opportunities offered by place-and-scaffold staging and surviving texts show that they were often exploited with skill and tact. In the first place the movement from one location to another or from scaffold to place had great dramatic potential, as when God descends to address Noah in the Wakefield play. It also offered the possibility of movement on a larger scale than pageant-waggon staging, as when Christ is dragged to and fro between the courts of Herod and Pilate in the N-town play already referred to. The scene illustrates yet another dramatic possibility, that of the sudden revelation, by drawing wide the curtain of a particular scaffold, of a striking tableau:

Here they take Jesus and lead him in great haste to [the] Herod; and the Herod's scaffold shall uncloze, showing Herod in state, all the Jews kneeling, except Annas and Caiphas, they shall stand.

The presence of several scaffolds as well as the neutral place also provided the possibility of dramatic juxtaposition, where a scene in one scaffold could be contrasted with that in another, violent movement in the central place with a still tableau in a scaffold or vice versa. One such juxtaposition occurs in the scene, again from the N-town cycle, where Jesus and his disciples are seen partaking of the Passover feast in accordance with the Old Law, while in another the Jewish priests are planning His punishment for allegedly breaking that Law.

In a theatre with so much emphasis on physical movement and so many

opportunities for it, the danger is of course that mere to-ing and fro-ing for its own sake would be resorted to whenever inspiration flagged, especially if it could be decked out as some kind of procession and embellished with an elaborate stage property; if you had gone to the trouble and expense of constructing a ship that actually moved or a devil breathing smoke and crepitating fire, the temptation to use these expensive items oftener than called for by strict dramatic necessity would be a natural one. It would be surprising if medieval playwrights never succumbed to it; but a newcomer to this drama is likely to be more surprised at how often the creators of these plays imaginatively exploit the possibilities of their stages rather than become enslaved by them.

The second main variety of medieval stage was on a more compact scale. It consisted of stages erected on 'pageants' which were moved from one place to another. The word 'pageant' is likely to cause some confusion because it was used indifferently to signify either the vehicles on which the plays were performed or the plays themselves. It is easy to understand how this method of staging came about if we recall that the feast of Corpus Christi originally began not as a dramatic festival but as a communal procession. Much as in a Lord Mayor's Show or Carnival procession of today, the Procession of the Host would have had floats depicting tableaux associated with the occasion, showing either particular miracles of the Host or scenes taken from the entire panorama of the Christian view of man and the world. It is reasonable to suppose that the cycle drama grew by the elaboration of the latter from silent tableaux to plays with words and action. This is certainly more plausible than the notion that the cycle drama developed out of the liturgical variety. To begin with, the pageants would be simply part of the procession and seen by those who followed it and by bystanders. The long-established practice of performing allegorical tableaux on specially constructed stages on the route of a royal entry doubtless influenced the technique of the pageant waggon. But in comparison to the former, the mechanical and other effects possible on a movable waggon must have been severely limited, though for their play of the Last Judgement the drapers of Coventry paid, among other things, for a hell-mouth complete with fire, a windlass and three fathoms of cord, pulpits for angels and a torch to set the world on fire. The only surviving description of a waggon stage in England is by David Rogers and is based on his father's manuscript notes which date from the sixteenth century. 'These pageants or carriage[s]' writes Rogers

was a high place made like a house with two rooms, being open at the top; the lower rooms they apparelled and dressed themselves, and in the higher room they played: and they stood upon six wheels. And when they had done with one carriage in one place, they wheeled the same from one street to another . . .

As Rogers indicates, the pageant waggons adopted a routine where each would stop at a specified point, perform its play and move on to the next point, while the spot it had vacated would be occupied by the next pageant and its play, and so on to the end of the cycle. In theory, therefore, all a spectator had to do was wait in one particular spot from dawn (at York the procession assembled at 4.30 a.m.) till

sunset and he could see the entire cycle. But in York at least, as a recent scholar has shown,¹ this would not have been possible; there would not have been time to do all the plays at all twelve (or sixteen) stations. Other places such as Chester took three days to perform a shorter cycle of plays, or, like Coventry, had very few stations. It is possible that at York and perhaps elsewhere, the pageant waggons started out in a single close procession, miming their play till all the stations were occupied and then acted their plays at the same time, moving on to allow the waggons which had not yet performed to do so.²

But how, if at all, the complete programme was managed is of less importance from our present standpoint than what pageant-waggon staging might have been like, what limitations it imposed on playwright and players and what advantages, if any, it had. The limitations are more immediately striking than any possible opportunities. The restrictions on stage machinery have already been noted, though we should not exaggerate this (the great age of theatrical machines was yet to come). More serious perhaps was the restriction of the acting space and the fact that the action was further removed from the audience than in the place-and-scaffold staging (though one of the N-town plays has the stage direction: 'Here Herod rages on the pageant and in the street also'). Finally, there would not have been a great deal of scope in this type of staging for violent or expansive movement or striking juxtapositions or contrasts of grouping.

It is not always possible to say definitely whether a play was written for one or other type of staging, partly because the texts of the cycles as we have them are conglomerates from different sources and not prompt copies and partly because such stage directions as do occur are often consistent with either type of staging. It is also worth noting that if one or more waggons were ranged round an open playing space (as seems occasionally to have happened once the theatrical part of the Corpus Christi celebrations was separated, probably some time early in the fifteenth century, from the procession proper), the ensuing performance was indistinguishable from place-and-scaffold staging. It is nevertheless possible to suggest that pageant-waggon staging did offer certain dramatic possibilities, mainly the inverse of its limitations. Thus the very smallness of the space enabled the dramatist to sharpen his focus and achieve moments of great intimacy and intensity, and the impracticability of much movement on a large scale provides the opportunity for concentration on a simple action or situation. The nativity play performed by the thatchers of York is as good an example as any of the creative use of pageant-waggon staging. With great economy of movement and language the play brings out at one and the same time the homeliness, the dignity and the mystery of the Virgin birth.

It would be a mistake to think that the costumes and properties used in these plays, in whatever style of staging, were drab or amateurish. There is plenty of pictorial evidence from the Continent and documentary evidence (such as inventories and statements of expenditure incurred) from English records to suggest otherwise. We may best imagine these stage spectacles as magnified versions of

¹ Alan Nelson, 'Principles of Processional Staging: York Cycle,' *Modern Philology* 67 (1969-70)

² see Stanley J. Kahrl, *Traditions of Medieval English Drama* (London, 1974).

medieval illuminated manuscripts — all that glittering splendour of gold and crimson and radiant blue with the added dimensions of voice and movement. Costumes were either symbolic, as when Eve wore a close-fitting white garment to symbolize naked innocence, or contemporary — the two priests in the N-town play wore the scarlet robes of medieval bishops.

Neither should we over-emphasize the fact that these plays were performed by amateurs rather than professionals. The members of a particular guild charged by the civil authorities with the production of a play were, it is true, not professional men of the theatre but butchers, tanners, cordwainers, and so on. But we know that the guilds took their responsibilities seriously, and the elaborateness, even lavishness of the presentations must have taken up a good deal of the time of all those concerned. In short, those involved in these productions, whether as actors, stage managers, designers or whatever, must have spent so much of the year at these duties that the distinction between amateur and professional is likely to have been blurred if not entirely obliterated. It is no accident that modern theatre directors and stage designers are turning increasingly to the techniques and conventions of the medieval theatre for their inspiration.

We have considered the cycle drama as a series of presented spectacles because that is how it was conceived by its creators and first experienced by its audience. But, while these plays are probably performed more often today than at any time in the intervening centuries, it is still probably true that most people first encounter them as printed texts. In this form they are less immediately accessible to the modern reader. The vagaries of medieval spelling and grammar occasionally get in the way of understanding and enjoyment, though the extent of this can very easily be exaggerated. Modernized editions, of which several good ones exist, offer one way out of the difficulty, but something more than 'quaintness' (a thoroughly expendable quality anyway) is inevitably lost — nuances of meaning, metrical effects and so on. A further difficulty arises from the fact that there is still a good deal of confusion and uncertainty as to the exact nature of the surviving texts, their relation to each other and to the performances which were based on them. None of the texts of the complete cycles are the original working manuscripts but only copies of these. The 48 plays of the York cycle exist in a manuscript which modern scholarship assigns to some period in the mid-fifteenth century, although the cycle is known to have existed in some form in the last quarter of the fourteenth century. There are five manuscript versions of the Chester cycle of 25 plays of various dates from 1591 to 1607. The 32 plays of the Wakefield (Towneley) cycle include five borrowed from the earlier York cycle surviving in a unique manuscript of the second half of the fifteenth century. The date 1468 appears at the end of a play in the N-Town cycle, in the same hand as that of most of the manuscript. Some of the manuscripts, such as those of the York (and possibly the Wakefield) cycle are 'registers' or official copies of each individual play made for the civic authorities. Others would have been the property of individual guilds. Many individual plays exist in a form which shows signs of evident revision of earlier texts.

The establishment of definitive texts of these plays is probably an impossible task. Nevertheless the texts as they stand, however imperfect or doubtful in provenance, are still in many cases very rewarding to read, provided we use our