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ENGL 412

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March 28 2024

2101 words

On the Intricacies of Emotion and Transition: How Medieval Dramatic Staging Negotiated an Intimate Emotional Link between Audience and Performance in the York Cycle

The modern theatrical performance emphasizes isolation. Most professional performances today are bound to the physical space of the theatre and its stage, separated from the audience by the invisible fourth wall. There is an inherent, unspoken acknowledgement that the world of the play and the real world seated mere meters away must not cross over. To medieval audiences, this segregated mode of performance would be in opposition to their interpretation of theatricality. The medieval play was not defined by clear division between entertainers and observers; it was an engagement between the performers and the audience where the concept of division unraveled entirely. Medieval theatre reinforced norms and hierarchies and used religious stories to comment on contemporary concerns. Action, especially positioning and movement between space, conveyed these meanings alongside the dialogue. The audience, being an intrinsic component in the execution of this staging, were as much a part of the performance as those in costume. Knowing this, are these plays still able to communicate their inherent performativity to modern readers when reduced to written text? This essay argues that, through an understanding of medieval cultural values and the symbolic purposes of performance spaces, the intimate relationship between medieval drama and its audience can be reforged via the surviving manuscripts. By rejecting modern conventions of theatricality and reading a play with the mind of a medieval observer, one can discern important staging cues from a play's dialogue that help communicate the play's performative symbolism. This essay will focus on three plays from the

York Cycle—the *Slaughter of the Innocents*, the *Crucifixion*, and the *Resurrection*—for their complex and intentional use of staging for thematic purposes.

When approaching any medieval play as a contemporary reader, it is crucially important to discern that these texts do not exist in a literary void. While a blind reading is possible, without cultural and historical knowledge about the period, one's attempt at interpretation will become invariably muddled by modern concepts of theatricality. Medieval drama was inseparably entwined within the cultural, religious, and political norms of the period. Greg Walker, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, describes how a medieval play's "cultural work was thus *work in the world* rather than just work in the theatre. Its interests were focused on the current agenda of the communities that produced it [...]" (77). Situating these plays as "*work in the world*" conveys their inherent permeability with the culture surrounding them. Their ideological messages were influenced by and aimed at a specific audience who would have understood the context of the play's themes. These works were neither created nor performed in a vacuum; therefore, they should not be read in one either. When it comes to identifying and interpreting how they were staged, one must first familiarize oneself with the cultural context surrounding these plays.

Focusing specifically on the pageants of the *York Corpus Christi Play*, this is an example of a production intrinsically intertwined with its community. The York Cycle plays were each produced by the York civic government and its guilds (Fitzgerald 77). Therefore, these plays were the innovation of the city itself and thus inseparable from it. While religious in topic, it is important to note that these pageants were made without the influence of the church. Instead, being a creation of the city's laypeople, the subject matter of these pageants explored the interaction between religion and everyday life. The religious stories told in these pageants often

simultaneously commented on topics important to the residents of York, amalgamating imagery and themes of the divine with the mundane. This overlap extended into how these plays were staged, wielding space, movement, and violence as tools of emotional communication that broke down barriers between performers and their audience.

The *York Corpus Christi Play* was intertwined with topics very familiar to its audience. While the stories themselves revolved around ancient history, their themes were distinctly contemporary. These topics included social commentary, class, and especially religious ideas of labour and authority. According to Andreea Boboc, “[work] emerges as the highest civic priority, and salvation is mediated through performances of work and its metaphorical applications” (247). The performance of labour onstage alongside biblical imagery thus communicates to the audience how labour can eventually bring about their ascension to divinity. Similarly, the role of violence and authority in the staging of these plays worked to create “affective piety” among the audience, where viewing the suffering of Christ, according to Klausner, is “a mode of devotion, and a path leading to a higher spiritual plane” (66). The importance of labour and suffering in creating an emotional response from the audience becomes apparent when examining how the staging worked to convey its messages visually and physically.

Among the pageants of the York Cycle, three stand out for how their staging creates a devotional reaction to Christ’s life and death: the *Slaughter of the Innocents*, the *Crucifixion*, and the *Resurrection*. All three intermix themes of labour, violence, and secular authority that would have been familiar to their medieval audience and thus evoked strong emotional reaction from them. How they conveyed these themes can be discerned through their staging choices—both implied by the texts themselves and hypothesized through examinations of staging practices at the time.

Starting with the *Slaughter of the Innocents*, the text clearly conveys two separate settings. It opens and closes in Herod's palace, with the action briefly moving to the town of Bethlehem toward the end of the play. These two distinct locations indicate that staging this play must clearly show movement from one space to another. Martin Walsh describes how these so-called "travelling scenes" would move from the elevated space of the pageant wagon into the audience to metaphorically alter the space they occupied (138). With that in mind, a reader can imagine the action around Herod taking place in the confined high place of the wagon, which is effectively isolated from the crowd, helping to distance Herod both physically and thematically. When the action moves to Bethlehem, it then transitions from the isolated stage into the close quarters of the audience, who become passive participants in the narrative. This transition and its implications are best seen in the lines "Come forth fellows in fere,/Lo, foundlings find we here" (*Slaughter* 192-193). "Come forth" indicates a transition, verbally suggesting that the soldiers are moving away from Herod's palace. Furthermore, "foundlings find we here" may have been addressed toward the audience as the performers portraying the soldiers moved into their space. The missing line from this stanza may have further cemented the movement from locus to platea and the osmosis between performers and audience.

The presence of transition in the *Slaughter of the Innocents* works to bring the audience emotionally into the play's stakes. The main action sees soldiers murdering innocent children on Herod's orders in the hopes of killing Jesus: "To Bethlehem bus you wend,/That shrew with shame to shend/That means to master me" (168-170). Knowing that the soldiers likely moved from the stage into the audience's space positions this action as one that dragged the audience into the narrative. Modern theatre is performed in private space accessible only to a select few; pageant-style performances like the York Cycle were explicitly public and therefore accessible to

all residents of the city. Knowing this, modern readers can imagine the presence of mothers with their own children in the crowd. These women, watching the initial scenes in Herod's palace, would feel emotionally distant from the action because the elevated wagon created a thematically and physically isolated space. However, once the action moved from the wagon into the crowd, their affective response would be heightened. As the performers playing the soldiers "murdered" babies nearby, the women in the audience may have instinctively feared for the lives of their own children. Movement from a high place to a low place thus helps make the audience more emotionally connected to the themes of the play by centering them within specific scenes. While a modern reader may discern movement from reading the text, the significance of this movement would be lost to them without important context, highlighting how inseparable medieval plays are from the performative elements that surround them.

The staging of the *Crucifixion* is more overtly communicated by the manuscript. The entirety of the play sees four soldiers struggling to crucify Jesus and raise the cross. According to Klausner, this specific viewpoint gave the play "an intensity of focus more powerful than that of any other surviving Passion play" (67). Compared to the *Slaughter of the Innocents*, the action here is contained to one scene, but movement still plays an important role in the thematic work of the narrative. The dialogue clearly describes many of the actions undertaken by the soldiers, especially with reference to their work and positioning. This is best seen during the sequence where they tie Jesus to the cross, with each soldier specifying where he is standing and what he is doing (*Crucifixion* 81-104). The choice to have the soldiers communicate their actions verbally, which they continue to do throughout the play, works to contrast them with Jesus. He only speaks twice—both times to beg forgiveness for humanity's sins (49-60; 253-264). Thus, while the soldiers loudly and actively conduct their work, Jesus passively does his own: dying

for humanity's salvation. Just as the staging in the *Slaughter of the Innocents* worked to create a passive sense of empathy in the audience, the staging here serves to conjure affective piety from those observing. By both watching and hearing all the suffering Jesus endures, the audience is drawn into a multisensory mode of devotion. Just as Jesus himself pleads, "Take thou ye shall no travail" (*Crucifixion* 254), the action of the play is carefully ensuring that the work of his suffering carries meaning for those who witness it.

The *Resurrection* ultimately combines elements from the two previous plays by using the distinction between a high space and a low space, and the contrast between divine work and mortal work to create affective piety in the audience. Mirroring the *Slaughter of the Innocents*, Pilate's court was likely staged on the pageant wagon, as Walsh describes how "the 'high places' in [the Passion plays] are evil, secular spaces" (144). Just like Herod, positioning Pilate above the audience isolates him. There is again a suggestion of movement from Soldier 1's lines: "Sir knights, take gear that most may gain/And let us go" (*Resurrection* 179-180). Movement to where in the staging is unclear; modern reproductions usually choose to repurpose the wagon for Jesus's tomb with some scenery changes (Sawyer 236). This staging choice visually highlights how the play is working to juxtapose Pilate's earthly authority with Jesus's divine authority. When centred around Pilate, the wagon space is a place where Christ's power is undermined. Pilate says, "I shall ordain, if that I may./He shall not rise" (*Resurrection* 159-160). He orders the soldiers to guard Jesus's body to assert his own dominance. When the wagon changes from Pilate's court to the tomb, where Jesus rises onstage, it symbolizes how Christ's divine power supersedes subversions against it. The magnitude of the high place is shared between these two figures because they both possess authority, but Christ's presence on the wagon ultimately reclaims the space from Pilate and transforms it into a divine sanctuary. Metaphorically, it shows

the audience how just as Jesus has authority over the pageant's staging, only He has true authority over the world. Thus, the play's "*work in the world*" is enacted through its staging choices, which expertly mirror its themes and help bring the audience closer to salvation.

Staging the York Cycle was a complex endeavour of many interlacing elements. Dialogue, division of space, violence, and the juxtaposition of mortal and divine labour all interact to elicit an emotional and devotional reaction from the audience. While some aspects of this intricate staging are still communicated by the surviving texts, without historical or cultural context, the thematic importance effectively becomes meaningless to contemporary readers. The importance of context to understanding these plays illustrates how they are not static documents with immutable meaning. They are living texts whose interpretation will change based on time, place, and audience. Where a medieval viewer may be overcome by devotional emotion at the sight of suffering, a modern reader may recoil in disgust at the focus on violence. Culture and what biases come with that culture has the power to change how one perceives art. The York Cycle demonstrates the importance of examining historical art without modern bias and embedding oneself in not only the text but the context that surrounds it.

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