

The York Mystery Plays are the oldest and best preserved of the four great cycles of medieval drama that survived from late-medieval England. Composed of a mixture of dramatic and homiletic material, they were performed for centuries in the East of England, and for the next two hundred years were usually performed annually on the feast of Corpus Christi, until they were suppressed by the agencies of mid-eighteenth-century reform. The cycle consists of some fifty short plays written in northern dialect verse, about half of which are preserved in modern spelling. Each play was part of a continuous sequence drawn from the Old and New Testaments and from apocryphal traditions, and all were related to one another and to the great epic theme of the Virgin and the Fall and Redemption of humanity. Each of these individual plays was financed and brought forth by one of the craft-guilds (or 'mysteries') of the city in a vast processional production lasting from dawn until after midnight. Modern revivals by the National Theatre, by university drama societies, and by the people of York itself, continue to reveal their remarkable historical power to move, inspire and instruct.

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# York Mystery Plays

## A Selection in Modern Spelling

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and

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## PREFACE

THIS volume contains twenty-two of the forty-seven extant pageants which go to make up the York Cycle of Mystery Plays. They have been selected on the grounds of their literary and dramatic merit, and also with a view to giving some idea of the scope and nature of the oldest and best-preserved of the English Corpus Christi cycles. The selection is designed with both the general reader and the student of medieval literature and early drama in mind, and it is also hoped that, although we have deliberately not attempted to include the apparatus of a performance script, the imaginative director will find here texts that will repay production in a variety of modern theatrical settings.

As well as illustrating something of the range of style and dramatic technique at the disposal of the medieval playwright, the selection is also intended to emphasize how the shape of the cycle was governed by subject-matter of profound and enduring spiritual significance, both to its contemporary audience and in later literary and artistic tradition. We have therefore included the plays on the Creation, the Fall of Man, the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ, and the Last Judgement. Within this abridgement of the cycle we have also included three further Old Testament plays, but we have expanded the selection principally by including plays associated with either the Nativity or the Crucifixion, thus creating two smaller cycles within the greater framework. The Passion sequence includes six of the eight plays often attributed to the York Realist, the first great poetic dramatist to have written in English, and this is the first time that the bulk of his work has been made available in an authentic text outside scholarly editions of the cycle.

The modernized texts presented here are derived from the critical edition of the original manuscript in *The York Plays* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), York Medieval Texts, second series, edited by Richard Beadle. The publishers and editors are grateful to Messrs Arnold for permission to use this text as the basis of the present selection. Each play is preceded by a brief Headnote drawing attention to such matters as sources, dramaturgy, versification, and staging, and also indicating some critical and interpretative approaches. The texts are accompanied by running glossaries and longer explanations of difficult lines and phrases at the foot of the page. The General Introduction deals with the origins and history of the cycle, including the circumstances of



## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Econ. H.R.</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
	OS Original Series
	ES Extra Series
	SS Supplementary Series
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
LSE	<i>Leeds Studies in English</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
REED	<i>Records of Early English Drama</i>
SP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
UTQ	<i>University of Toronto Quarterly</i>
VCH	<i>Victoria County History</i>
YES	<i>Yearbook of English Studies</i>

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

THE York Cycle of Mystery Plays is one of the great literary and theatrical monuments of the later Middle Ages in England, though to describe the cycle as solely a medieval phenomenon is in some ways misleading. Though it came into being in the later fourteenth century, when Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Langland's *Piers Plowman* were being composed, it enjoyed a generally continuous run of annual performances until the late 1560s, and Shakespeare's lifetime. The cycle was an immense undertaking for the city, both financially and in terms of the manpower required to mount it: the text as it has come down to us calls for over 300 speaking parts alone. Its spiritual purpose was the glorification of God, and its didactic intention to instruct the unlettered in the historical basis of their faith, but there is no doubt that the cycle was also intended to reflect the wealth and prestige of the city, particularly the economic pride and self-confidence of the merchants and master-craftsmen who financed the performances annually. The cycle seems to have come into being with the great flowering of York's prosperity in the second half of the fourteenth century, after the Black Death of 1349, when the city stood second only to London in national importance and wealth. Its decline after the middle of the sixteenth century parallels the economic decline of York itself during that period, whilst the rapid rise and spread of the extremest forms of Protestantism began to render the plays a doctrinally suspect relic of the old faith.

York's is the oldest and best preserved of the surviving English cycles. One similar in scope and nature has come down to us from Chester, and there are also comparable collections of plays in the 'Towneley' and 'N-Town' manuscripts. The Towneley manuscript contains plays connected with Wakefield, together with several pieces partially or wholly borrowed from York, which may well represent the Wakefield cycle. The 'N-Town' plays, judging by their dialect, originated in East Anglia, but are not known to have been connected with any particular town or with craft-guilds, as the northern cycles were. The antiquarian misnomer by which they were long known (*Ludus Coventriae*) is not now used, but fragments of the genuine Coventry cycle have survived, as have single plays from the lost cycles of Norwich and Newcastle. Many other towns and cities in the British Isles are known to have once had play-cycles, but now only fleeting



emphasize the events surrounding the Nativity and the Passion, at the expense of his ministry on earth. At York, the dramatization of the Passion came to occupy about half the cycle, and was much revised over the years.

At the earliest stage in the history of the York cycle a decision must have been taken to divide the long sequence of events stretching from the Creation to the Last Judgement into manageable units for the purposes of processional performance. Each of these units became a separate play, or, as it was then often known, 'pageant', and each was assigned to a particular craft-guild of the city. The craft-guilds therefore became responsible for furnishing the pageant-wagon on which the play was to be performed, and for finding suitable actors, properties, costumes, and so forth. It is also possible that the guilds commissioned scripts for their plays locally, but the names of the playwrights have not survived. Those sufficiently learned in sacred history are likely to have been clerics, such as parish priests, guild chaplains, and chantry priests, or perhaps members of the monastic or mendicant orders, who were strongly present in York. The result of this dividing-up of the long narrative was the following sequence of pageants, which for the most part reflects the cycle as it was constituted in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, about half-way through its two-hundred-year existence. The plays marked with an asterisk are those included in the present selection. Those with an obelisk against them are no longer extant, but are known through documentary references in the civic archives at York.

* The Barkers	<i>The Fall of the Angels</i>
The Plasterers	<i>The Creation</i>
The Cardmakers	<i>The Creation of Adam and Eve</i>
The Fullers	<i>Adam and Eve in Eden</i>
* The Coopers	<i>The Fall of Man</i>
The Armourers	<i>The Expulsion</i>
The Glovers	<i>Cain and Abel</i>
* The Shipwrights	<i>The Building of the Ark</i>
* The Fishers and Mariners	<i>The Flood</i>
The Parchmentmakers and Bookbinders	<i>Abraham and Isaac</i>
* The Hosiers	<i>Moses and Pharaoh</i>
The Spicers	<i>The Annunciation and Visitation</i>
* The Pewterers and Founders	<i>Joseph's Trouble about Mary</i>

* The Tilehatchers	<i>The Nativity</i>
The Chandlers	<i>The Shepherds</i>
* The Masons; The Goldsmiths	<i>Herod and The Magi</i>
St Leonard's Hospital	<i>The Purification</i>
* The Marshals	<i>The Flight into Egypt</i>
* The Girdlers and Nailers	<i>The Slaughter of the Innocents</i>
The Spurriers and Lorimers	<i>Christ and the Doctors</i>
The Barbers	<i>The Baptism</i>
* The Smiths	<i>The Temptation</i>
† The Vintners	<i>The Marriage at Cana</i>
The Curriers	<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>
* The Skinners	<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>Christ before Annas and Caiaphas</i>
* The Tapiters and Couchers	<i>Christ before Pilate (1): The Dream of Pilate's Wife</i>
* The Litsters	<i>Christ before Herod</i>
The Cooks and Waterleaders	<i>The Remorse of Judas</i>
* The Tilemakers	<i>Christ before Pilate (2): The Judgement</i>
The Shearmen	<i>The Road to Calvary</i>
* The Pinners	<i>The Crucifixion</i>
* The Butchers	<i>The Death of Christ</i>
* The Saddlers	<i>The Harrowing of Hell</i>
* The Carpenters	<i>The Resurrection</i>
The Winedrawers	<i>Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene</i>
The Woolpackers and Woolbrokers	<i>The Supper at Emmaus</i>
The Scriveners	<i>The Incredulity of Thomas</i>



The Tailors	<i>The Ascension</i>
The Potters	<i>Pentecost</i>
The Drapers	<i>The Death of the Virgin</i>
+ The Linenweavers	<i>The Funeral of the Virgin</i>
The Woollenweavers	<i>The Assumption of the Virgin</i>
The Hostellers	<i>The Coronation of the Virgin</i>
* The Mercers	<i>The Last Judgement</i>

The manuscript containing the text of the cycle is a large volume, measuring about 11 inches by 8 inches, consisting of 268 parchment leaves, bound in oak boards covered with leather. It is nearly all in the handwriting of a single unidentified scribe, who probably executed the work at some time between 1463 and 1477. Known as the 'Register' of the Corpus Christi play, this manuscript constituted the city's official record of the content of the cycle, and was the property of the corporation. In the sixteenth century there are records of the fact that it was used by a city official to check what the actors were actually saying in the course of the annual performance. Many pages have later annotations deriving from this activity, showing where plays had been revised, or had even been completely rewritten since the compilation of the manuscript. Contrary to a widely held belief, these sixteenth-century annotations in the manuscript were not the work of reforming ecclesiastical censors, though we do know from other sources that the plays near the end of the cycle on the later life of the Virgin Mary were suppressed in 1548. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Register passed through the hands of several antiquarians and collectors, before coming to its final resting-place in the British Museum in 1899.

The Register was compiled from copies of the individual plays held by the craft-guilds for the purposes of rehearsal and performance. A sixteenth-century example of one of these prompt-copies, or 'originals' as they were known, has survived (the Scriveners' *Incredulity of Thomas*) but the rest are lost. For something of the history of the cycle prior to the compilation of the Register one must turn to documentary materials in the civic archives at York. Among them is the volume known as the 'A/Y Memorandum Book', which contains records of many of the most important decisions of the governing body of the city in the Middle Ages, the ordinances and constitutions of numerous craft-guilds, and an interesting document called the 'Ordo Paginarum', 'The Order of the Pageants'. This consists of a list of the guilds, similar to the one given above, with a note of the

content of their respective plays. It was compiled by the Town Clerk in 1415, and was probably used to check the ordering and content of the cycle in the period before the Register was compiled. The 'Ordo Paginarum', though itself much altered and revised, reveals that the cycle had by 1415 assumed the shape and scope it was to have for the rest of its career. Comparison with the text in the Register reveals that a number of plays were revised during the fifteenth century, and that some were reassigned to other guilds. The *Passion* section, in particular, was extensively reworked by an outstandingly able dramatist, known as the *York Realist* (see the Headnote to the *Conspiracy*). However, the general aspect and scope of the cycle remained the same, as it was to do until its decline and eventual abandonment in the latter half of the sixteenth century.

The origins and progress of the cycle up to 1415 are much more difficult to trace because of the paucity of documentary evidence, but a reference in a document dated 1376, referring to the storage of three Corpus Christi pageant-wagons, is sometimes taken to imply that the entire cycle was already in existence at that date. A more certain construction may be placed on a petition, dated 1399, sent by the commons of the city to its governing body, pointing out that the Corpus Christi play was a great financial burden on the craft-guilds, and that it was tending to overrun its allotted day of performance. This petition also sets out for the first time the processional route through the city taken by the pageant-wagons, and the 'stations' where they stopped to perform before the audiences which had gathered.

The craft-guilds of medieval York were the principal units of social and economic organization in medieval English towns in general, being made up of master-craftsmen in the various trades and callings, who had gained the franchise of the city either through satisfactory apprenticeship or inheritance. As well as establishing standards of workmanship, administering the system of apprenticeship, and laying down the lines of demarcation between trades, the guilds also had important social characteristics and functions. The members of a guild, their families, and apprentices lived their lives partially in common, often occupying the same area of the city, as some of the surviving street-names of York show (Spurriergate, Tanner Row). They tended to worship together at the same church, and dined together on the feast of their patron saint or other liturgical occasion. A number had their own halls; those of the Merchant Adventurers and Merchant Tailors are still to be seen in York. The craft-guilds were occasionally referred to as 'mysteries', and from the association of the crafts with the pageants of the Corpus Christi play arose the modern expression



'mystery plays'. 'Mystery' should not, therefore, be understood to connote anything as to the content of the cycle. The expenses of the annual performance of each play in the cycle were defrayed by a levy on the guild to which that play was assigned. Little is known as to precisely how the guilds came to have responsibility for their particular plays, owing to lack of evidence from the earliest period of the cycle's history. The appropriateness of some of the assignments to the occupations of the guilds is obvious: the Shipwrights' *Building of the Ark*, the Vintners' *Marriage at Cana* (where Christ turned the water into wine), the Bakers' *Last Supper*. These 'appropriate' assignments probably had much to do with the idea of the sanctity of a craft's daily labour, its part in the divine eternal scheme of things and the history of man's salvation, rather than the crude modern notion that the guilds used the plays to 'advertise' their products.

The performance of the cycle as a whole was organized and regulated by the governing body of the city, which was elected by and from the members of the craft-guilds. It appears that the ecclesiastical authorities had no part in it at this official level, though the parish clergy and members of religious orders were undoubtedly involved in helping to bring forth individual pageants, sometimes as 'directors'. The events leading up to the annual performance were set in motion early in Lent, when the civic authorities met and sent out formal instruction to each participating guild to bring forth its play on Corpus Christi day, three months or so hence. The guilds then held meetings to make detailed arrangements for their own productions. These were at first principally financial. Each guild elected officers known as 'pageant-masters', in effect the producers of the play, whose first task it was to collect the money paid by the craftsmen towards their play, their 'pageant silver'. As well as collecting annually from their members, the guilds also operated a system of fines for poor workmanship and various technical infringements of guild regulations, the proceeds of which also went towards the play. The pageant-masters laid out their money in a variety of ways. The storage and maintenance of the pageant-wagon and the purchase or refurbishment of properties and costumes were the main material expenses. In addition, a 'director' (though no such word then existed) and suitable actors had to be found, and their refreshments provided at rehearsal and on the day of performance. Evidence surviving in the records of the Mercers' and Bakers' guilds suggests that money was given to an individual, sometimes a cleric, who had responsibility for directing their play. It was evidently his task to hire, rehearse, and pay the actors, which suggests a degree of 'professionalism' in the

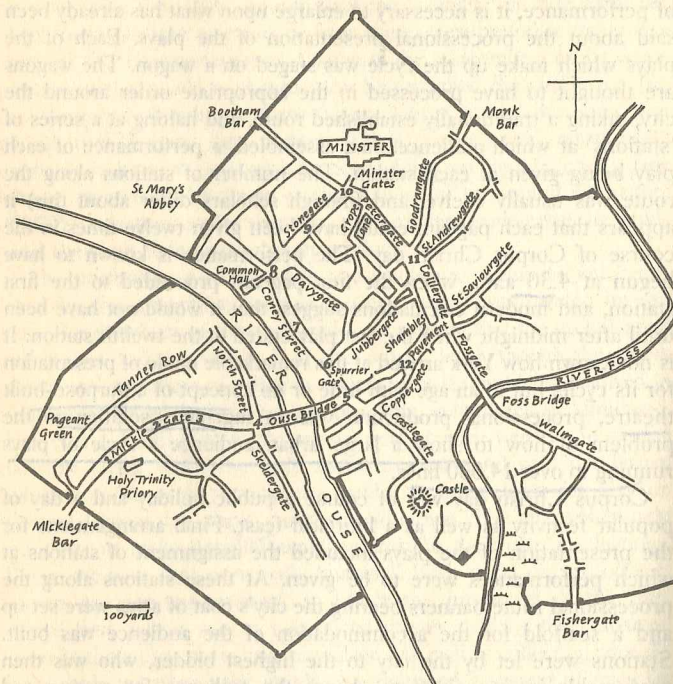
presentation of the cycle. Finally, the pageant-masters gave a dinner shortly after Corpus Christi, at which the officers of the guild reviewed their financial position.

Before entering into greater detail about arrangements for the day of performance, it is necessary to enlarge upon what has already been said about the processional presentation of the plays. Each of the plays which make up the cycle was staged on a wagon. The wagons are thought to have processed in the appropriate order around the city, taking a traditionally established route, and halting at a series of 'stations' at which audiences had assembled, a performance of each play being given at each station. The number of stations along the route was usually twelve, and (though scholars differ about this) it appears that each pageant could have been given twelve times in the course of Corpus Christi day. The performance is known to have begun at 4.30 a.m., when the first pageant proceeded to the first station, and modern calculations suggest that it would not have been until after midnight when the last play ended at the twelfth station. It is not known how York arrived at this remarkable mode of presentation for its cycle, but in an age with little or no concept of a purpose-built theatre, processional production was an ingenious solution to the problem of how to show a large urban audience a cycle of plays running to over 14,000 lines.

Corpus Christi day was of course a public holiday and a day of popular festivity as well as a liturgical feast. Final arrangements for the presentation of the plays included the assignment of stations at which performances were to be given. At these stations along the processional route banners bearing the city's coat of arms were set up and a scaffold for the accommodation of the audience was built. Stations were let by the city to the highest bidder, who was then presumably in a position to charge the audience for seating and refreshments during the long performance. Many of the audience, however, must have stood in the street to see the plays, and have wandered from station to station in the course of the day.

The route along which the stations were distributed never varied, though the positions of some of the stations could change slightly from year to year. Those familiar with the topography of York will see from the accompanying map that the streets along which the pageant-wagons passed remain to this day. The pageant-masters, actors, and others concerned with mounting the performance marshalled the pageant-wagons initially on an open space in the south-west angle of the city wall known as Pageant Green (or Toft Green). From there they moved into and along Micklegate, over Ouse Bridge, and then





via Coney Street and Stonegate, past the Minster Gates, then through Low Petergate and Colliergate to the Pavement. It appears that the stations were on the right-hand side of this route, with the audiences facing them on the left. The positions of some of the stations never varied. No. 1 was at the gates of the Priory of the Holy Trinity not far from Micklegate Bar. It was here that a civic official sat with the manuscript Register and checked the first performance of each play annually. The eighth station was close to the Guildhall, and here members of the city's governing body saw the plays free. No. 10, at Minster Gates, was favoured by the cathedral clergy, and the last station, on the Pavement, brought the plays to the commercial centre of the city, the site of markets, fairs, proclamations, and executions. Given the great length of the cycle and the number of times each play was performed, the swift and unhindered passage of the pageant-wagons from station to station was of the utmost importance. The civic authorities had the power to fine any guild whose play hindered the presentation of an orderly sequence. At the end of the Woolpackers' and Woolbrokers' play of the *Supper at Emmaus* one of the characters actually says to the audience that they must now hasten to the next station:

Here may we not mell more at this tide,  
For process of plays that presses in plight.

('That is all we can say at this time, because of the procession of pageants which is queuing up [behind us]').

To have established broadly how the cycle was designed for presentation is not to visualize what it would have looked like. It is clear, both from guild records and from internal evidence in the plays, that a pageant-wagon was neither simply a stage on wheels, nor a commercial vehicle, like the modern pageant 'float', converted for the day. The wagons used in the production of the York cycle were custom-built for each guild, to suit its play, and, what is more, were man-handled around the route, not drawn by animals. At that point, however, it becomes more difficult to be specific. York is not short of material in its civic records relating to pageant-wagons, but since everyone evidently knew what such vehicles looked like, they are never described from first principles. What comes down to the modern investigator, by and large, is a collection of cryptic accounts using unfamiliar or ambiguous terminology.

There are some references to the Bakers' pageant-wagon in the records, which supply clues to its construction, but the picture would still be highly speculative, were it not for the survival of some important



materials relating to the Mercers' *Last Judgement* wagon over a period of years. The first of these is an indenture of 1433 which provides the nearest thing to a description of a wagon we are likely to find. It includes an inventory of parts for what the Mercers later call their 'great pageant'. It is a 'pageant with four wheels', but clearly not a flat cart, for it has a complicated superstructure including a 'heaven of iron'. It also appears to have incorporated integral winching gear by means of which God descended from, and ascended to, the said heaven. When the 'hell-mouth', also described as part of the structure, is added, a picture of a complicated multi-level structure begins to emerge. This is in keeping with a later account from Norwich in which the Grocers' pageant-wagon is defined as, 'a house of wainscot . . . on a cart with four wheels'.

Apart from the mechanical details concerning the transportation of God from one level to another, other items in the Mercers' indenture also give an indication of how the pageant-wagon was decorated. The mention of a backcloth, or 'coster', of red damask instantly demonstrates that the performance area had a back and a front, ruling out the possibility that the audience was grouped around the vehicle on all sides. Other cloths are also listed which would have concealed the wheels and the unsightly underside of the vehicle once it was *in situ* at a station. God had his own special backdrop, also a 'brandreth of iron', possibly like a modern fire-basket, with four ropes at the corners, in which he came and went from heaven. Heaven itself was arrayed with red and blue clouds, gold stars, sunbeams, and a wooden rainbow. In addition there was a series of model angels, nine of which were operated mechanically by a 'long small cord', which caused them to 'run about in the heaven', as the final stage direction in the play indicates.

Even with all the above information available in what is indeed an exceptional case, there has still been room for interpretation to have produced at least three careful and scholarly reconstructions which diverge in certain major respects. Crucially, none of the dimensions of the various parts is mentioned. It is also clear from further documents associated with the guild that the Mercers, in times of particular affluence, were given to improving their equipage. In 1463 the guild added what appears to have been a completely separate entity, a 'new pageant that was made for the souls to rise out of'. About this 'pageant' there is much less information; it is not even clear that it had wheels, although this is probable, as the guild had had some small wheels made in the recent past. What is more, in 1501, the Mercers scrapped the 'great pageant' of the 1433 indenture and commissioned one built

'new substantially in everything thereunto belonging'. It is not until 1526 that there is anything approaching a description of the new vehicle, and then an inventory simply lists hell-door, windows, angels, an iron seat, several pulleys, and a cloud. Reconstruction on the basis of this meagre information is not really practicable.

What then is to be learned from the history of the Mercers' pageant-wagon over a period of nearly a hundred years? Perhaps most significantly it brings home the fact that a pageant-wagon was a very specific construction, intended solely for the production of a single episode in the cycle. In a sense, therefore, the Mercers' indenture tells us only about the manner in which the *Last Judgement* was staged. It may serve as a rough guide to what the other guilds' wagons were like, but it is important here to remember that the Mercers were an extremely wealthy guild throughout the period in question; wagons belonging to less affluent bodies may not have been so elaborate. Also there are plays in the cycle to which an enclosed playing space would not have been appropriate, for example *The Crucifixion*, which could well have been performed on a flat cart.

The Mercers' records contribute to a growing sense of the cycle as an essentially fluid event. In the same way that plays changed hands and were reworked, so too the visual aspect of the cycle must have changed over the years. As a guild's fortune increased it might have its play elaborated and rewritten, or have its pageant-wagon modified or replaced. One decision could lead to another, but the evidence for each change taking place survives, if it survives at all, in a variety of different sources. Similarly, declining fortunes would perhaps lead to guilds being unable to maintain their wagons and their plays at all, which in turn might lead to amalgamations with other small guilds, or transference of the play to different ownership.

The pageant-wagon itself was an item of considerable value and prestige. From the point of view of the quality of workmanship involved, the records of the Mercers' 1501 wagon, about which there is less detail, impart one important piece of information: for the construction of the wagon the Mercers engaged a famous carver, Thomas Drawswerd. Fortunately an example of Drawswerd's work survives in the beautiful rood screen in the church of St Mary Magdalen, Newark, Nottinghamshire. A cursory examination of the quality of carving involved serves to dispel any residual connection between the pageant-wagon and the farm cart, although the chassis and wheels were, in all probability, derived from the latter. It has indeed been suggested that the superstructure of the wagon was demountable for storage purposes, since storage of a multi-level vehicle, perhaps as much as 20 feet



(6 metres) high, would pose considerable problems. Many guilds had their own 'pageant-houses' or garages for their wagons. Many of these were close to Pageant Green (from where the cycle set out), often on land rented on an annual basis from the city authority. There is some evidence also of guilds sub-letting pageant-houses to one another.

Although it is possible to tell from the records that the pageant-houses were large and stoutly constructed buildings, the actual dimensions of the York pageant-wagon cannot be ascertained with any degree of accuracy. The length and breadth must, however, have been limited, if a vehicle made of heavy materials was to be man-handled around the narrower corners in the city. Even allowing for a generous estimate of surface area, the playing space afforded was very limited, making it difficult to visualize the staging of multi-location plays, such as the Hosiers' *Moses and Pharaoh*. The Mercers' records make it clear that auxiliary 'pageants' might be used, and the Masons' and Goldsmiths' composite play shows two wagons being used in tandem, but in the absence of further evidence these must be treated as exceptions. No true picture of the staging of a play can be reached without due consideration of the evidence in the plays themselves for the use of the whole space available, not only on the pageant-wagon but also in the street around. It is in this respect that wagon performance diverges markedly from performance on the proscenium stage.

The York cycle's stage directions are few and far between, particularly when it comes to indicating movement from place to place, or the relative locations of different 'scenes' within the play. It is apparent in most of the longer plays that all of the action could not possibly have been accommodated on the deck of the wagon itself. In one of the surviving plays from the Coventry cycle there is the direction, 'Here Herod rages in the pageant and in the street also'. This has been eagerly seized upon as evidence that the arrangement suggested by the texts of many cycle plays was indeed correct. In twelfth- and thirteenth-century liturgical drama the action was divided between that which took place processionally, moving through the church, and that which was located in a symbolic area, such as around the Easter Sepulchre, an altar designed for the ritual representation of the Resurrection. It is possible to see the individual play within the cycle in the same way, except that the area on the pageant-wagon serves for all the specific playing spaces (*loci*) and the street as the area in which unlocalized action took place (*platea*). Hence, in *The Conspiracy*, the *locus* is Pilate's court, the wagon being decorated to represent that, which means that the dialogue between Judas and the Porter would

be conducted outside the court, in the street. Similarly in *Joseph's Trouble*, the wagon is evidently Mary's house, and all of Joseph's long complaint, in which he solicits the sympathy of men in the audience, would have been delivered at their level. Obviously, there are still unexplained problems of staging when a play appears to involve more than one *locus*, but in broad terms the division of the action between street and wagon is the important one, particularly when the relationship between audience and players at a given moment is considered.

If the physical presentation of the York cycle can be reconstructed only in part, the manner in which it was acted is a matter of much greater speculation. As far as contemporary records are concerned, the necessary qualifications were cryptically described, but were apparently quite basic. After the 1415 'Ordo Paginarum' in the 'A/Y Memorandum Book' appears the Proclamation of the plays, which was made on the vigil of Corpus Christi, and also when the banners were set up in the designated positions for the stations, about a week before Corpus Christi. This specifies the manner in which the plays should be conducted, with an allusion to the players which simply requires that they be 'well arrayed and openly speaking'. An ordinance of 1476 shows that there was some means of auditioning the players: four of the 'most cunning [skilful], discreet and able players' were called before the mayor to examine the plays, and to dispense with the services of any player found to be wanting in 'cunning, voice or person'. These records merely confirm that the greatest offence a player can commit in an outdoor performance is to be inaudible.

In whatever way we choose to interpret this material, however, it is clear that, given a performance in which the same character was played by many different actors consecutively, there was no opportunity for anything like method acting. Indeed, a greater unity would best have been achieved by the use of a formal, demonstrative style, matching spoken word to gesture. This style was particularly appropriate to outdoor performance, which was often restricted to the confined area of the pageant-wagon, but had to be clearly understood by an audience crowding in the street. The demonstrative style was also appropriate to a drama which sought to convey eternal truths on a mythic scale. It is possible that medieval acting style in this respect owed something to the techniques advocated by the ancient rhetoricians. Echoes of Cicero's *De oratore* have been heard in the dramatist's instructions to the actors in the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman play the *Mystère d'Adam*, which exhort the players to 'speak coherently', and to 'make gestures agreeing with the thing they are speaking of'. When one considers the metrical intricacy of some of the York plays, it seems



unlikely that naturalistic acting had a large part in their presentation.

There is one group of characters about which more can be said, as chance allusions to their manner of presentation have survived, namely Herod, Pilate, and—by extension—the other major figures of evil in the cycle. Chaucer's Miller in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* has a mouth like a furnace, and cries in 'Pilate's voice', whilst in the Paston Letters of the fifteenth century, the Duke of Suffolk, when in a rage, is compared to a play-Herod. Everyone is familiar with Hamlet's injunction to his players to avoid the style of over-acting that 'out-Herods Herod'. It is easy to imagine the alliterative lines of the trial plays in the York Passion sequence assisting some actors to an exaggeratedly bombastic performance.

Not all the characters in the York cycle lend themselves to stylized means of presentation, however. It seems most likely that a mixed style was employed, in keeping with the mixed physical levels of playing, introducing at certain points a more naturalistic aspect to the performance where it was desirable to achieve proximity to the audience, bringing sacred history to them as something immediate which encompassed them. It is, for instance, difficult to conceive of a demonstrative rendering of the dialogue between Judas and the Porter, alluded to above, or in the scenes of disarray amongst the soldiers in *The Resurrection*, when they discover that Christ has escaped. The plays are liberally peppered with ordinary people and there was didactic capital to be made out of presenting them as such.

In this context it is necessary to consider how the plays were costumed. Clearly, in an age which had no sophisticated perspective on chronology, there was little attempt at historical costume, the cut of clothes being whatever was contemporary, with exotic touches added to denote race or rank. Much of the evidence we have for costume is construed from surviving inventories and contemporary pictures and stained glass. Most Jews, for instance, would have worn the strange pointed hats which mark them out in contemporary iconography; the Magi, dressed by the Goldsmiths, would have appeared as royalty should, as would Herod, although he may have had something about his person to associate him with the infidel. Biblical soldiers, peasants, and tradesmen must have looked very much like fifteenth-century Yorkshiremen of the same rank, and, as is clearly the case with the Shipwrights' Noah, carried the genuine tools of their trade.

Difficulties arise in clothing those whose rank is beyond anything present in any society: the extremes of good and evil, particularly the inhabitants of heaven and hell. The main way of dealing with these

characters was to conceal the players behind masks. For evidence of this we return again to the Mercers' indenture of 1433 which contains an extensive list of 'visors' or 'faces', including six devils' faces, visors and wigs for evil souls and good souls, visors and diadems for the Apostles, and a gilded visor for God. It seems that masking was relatively common in the cycle plays, from full heads to faces made up in some unnatural manner, often by gilding. Long wigs and beards were also called for to make the fashionably clean-shaven fifteenth-century man, with his pudding-basin haircut, look like a patriarch or an apostle. From the strictly practical point of view, men who had to play the part of women, which was commonly if not absolutely the rule, certainly needed wigs, if not masks as well. The use of the full-face mask, or even, in the case of devils, the whole head, is most interesting because of the effect it must have created in performance, of completely depersonalizing the wearer, dissociating the actor from normal society, and, because of the limited expression it allowed, imparting a degree of inscrutability appropriate particularly to the Godhead. Thus, the audience was called upon to identify with certain characters, such as Joseph and the shepherds, while at the same time, by means of demonstrative acting style and facial masks, it was distanced from God, Satan, and the angels. The emotional impact of much of the action was thus achieved by bringing into close proximity the natural with the supernatural, an effect nowhere more concentrated than in the events surrounding the Nativity. Increasingly, the performance of a cycle of mystery plays emerges not as the theatre of total illusion, but of selected illusory effects to a didactic end.

To bring together all the details of production methods is to discover a theatre in which audience and performers are related in a way that is entirely different from that of the theatre of the recent past. The proximity of players and audience meant that although the latter could not influence the course of events, they were none the less implicated to bear witness. Despite the apparently fragmented nature of the cycle, the message which bore down upon that audience was strongly unified iconographically. Throughout the play texts, there are strong and basic images, which transcend the cycle's episodic nature: intellectually it is drawn together by means of typology, as the events of the Old Testament are clearly framed for the manner in which they anticipate the New. The images of light and darkness, for good and evil, recur constantly. Clothing too, which takes on a specific significance in the *Trial before Herod*, must have been visually arresting throughout. Costumes, props, masks, and language were designed in these plays to serve a function more specific than mere embellishment:



they were, as Meg Twycross has convincingly demonstrated on numerous occasions, semantically expressive in themselves. Illusion was not illusion so much as a figural refinement of reality: characters and events were arranged to carry a specific didactic significance as they do in the religious art of the period. In the same way that a painting or a stained-glass window has its meaning, the cycle was a series of such pictures presented kaleidoscopically as the elements formed first one picture and were then rearranged in preparation for the appearance of another picture, framed within the space on the pageant-wagon. Considered from this point of view, it is easy to understand how mystery plays came to be defended from attacks by the Lollards against their supposed idolatry, as a 'living book'.

Finally, in reconstructing the nature of the original performance of the York cycle, it is necessary to consider the role played by music, since it too had its figural reverberations. Music played a large part in the presentation of the cycle, and many of the stage directions in the manuscript are in fact cues for music. They are invariably cues for vocal music, and, where the piece is specified, it can nearly always be traced to liturgical origins. It follows that some at least of the actors must also have been competent singers. There was apparently little or no use made of instrumental music in most of the cycle, there being only one place in the present selection where it would certainly have been heard in performance: in the *Last Judgement*, when the angels blow their trumpets, a moment perhaps the more striking if instrumental music had not been employed in the preceding plays. The vocal music was often introduced to express human thanksgiving for divine mercy, especially at or near the ends of plays, such as the *Flood*, *Moses and Pharaoh*, and the *Harrowing of Hell*. The unspecified singing called for in the *Entry into Jerusalem* is likely to have consisted of appropriate pieces from the liturgy of Palm Sunday. On occasion, singing could also have a practical function, 'covering' action on stage for which there was no dialogue. Examples are the use of the Whitsun hymn 'Veni creator spiritus' to occupy the time taken by Christ to reach the pinnacle of the temple in the *Temptation*, or the presence of angelic singing to cover Christ's assumption of the judgement seat in the *Last Judgement*. In the *Resurrection*, Christ rises from the tomb and exits without speaking, while angels sing the Easter anthem 'Christus resurgens', and here the music not only covers the action but also comments on, or rather, in a different way, expresses its nature. It is often remarked that music in the drama of this period tends to be used for representational rather than for affective purposes. This is the case in the *Resurrection*, where the singing signifies Christ's

reappearance in divine form, but it is music's most marked function in scenes where God appears, or where he intervenes in human affairs. The presence of music was essential to the depiction of heaven in the Creation and the Last Judgement, where it represented the harmony of the divinely ordained and divinely sustained universe.

It would be improper to conclude without mentioning some recent productions of the cycle. Like all the drama of its period, the cycle has enjoyed a revival in recent years, following nearly four hundred years of neglect in the theatre. Modern productions fall into two broad categories: the attempted reconstruction of the style of the original productions, and the adaptation, which takes selected parts of the text from one or more cycles and applies modern theatrical techniques to it.

Amongst major 'revivals' of the York cycle, the one produced as York's contribution to the Festival of Britain in 1951 must, historically, take pride of place: it was the first, and set the pattern for those of later years. The plays, as they are presented at each York Festival, take the form of a skeletal cycle, telescoped to last only three hours and performed not processionally but in the large open-air 'theatre' created in the ruins of the Benedictine abbey of St Mary's. The text is considerably simplified and adapted. With their banks of lights, huge cast of extras, and a professional celebrity playing Christ, the York Mystery Plays as they are now performed in their native city can bear little physical resemblance to their original, unless as a gorgeous spectacle and a clear manifestation of civic pride. They continue to prove immensely popular and, if anything, rather more pious than their original. SB

A complete contrast to the York Festival style of revival was the production called *The Passion*, created by the National Theatre Company out of the York and Towneley cycles. The original production was first performed in April 1977 and concentrated on the episodes surrounding the Passion itself. This later became Part II, and Part I, from the Creation to the Baptism, was devised and added for the Edinburgh Festival of 1980. Both parts later appeared in the Cottesloe Theatre and toured elsewhere. Despite its sombre setting in Edinburgh's Assembly Rooms, home of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, which was once so effective in suppressing the cycle plays in Scotland that no texts survive, this was a most exciting and innovative production, carefully treading the line between the irreverent and the sentimental. The performance used the whole arena, so that the standing audience was constantly being assailed both visually and physically. The production, spread over two evenings, dividing after the Nativity, received a considerable critical



accolade. One of its more powerful moments was the Annunciation, in which a black Gabriel, in a sumptuous robe high on a fork-lift truck, picked up the beam from a spotlight in a circular mirror and directed it on Mary kneeling below, staunchly proletarian in wellington boots. As Paula Neuss concluded, in a recent survey of modern productions, it created something new and exciting for an audience no longer automatically 'united in a common belief'.

The 1970s saw two serious and scholarly attempts to reconstruct the York cycle in its processional form. The first was presented in the grounds of the University of Leeds in 1975. Individual plays were assigned to amateur groups, many of them university departments or local educational establishments, who stood in for the original guilds. The performance of the whole cycle took three days and was performed for the first time since the 1560s, on pageant-wagons at the three 'stations' on the route. The omission of two plays notwithstanding, this was a serious attempt to approximate the experience of an original performance for players and audience alike. One of the features that emerged from the Leeds performance and which was probably true also of the original cycle, was the unevenness of quality and style of the individual groups taking part. This is a feature which a performance by professional actors completely irons out. The unevenness is not necessarily distracting, since the text itself represents a fluid entity captured at one point in its development. The overall effect, given that the performance is at least competent or better, as at Leeds, is one of desirable variety. Another salient feature of the truly processional reconstruction, particularly when the stations are in earshot of one another, is the dramatic effect of incidental simultaneous performance, for example where Mary and Joseph's escape into Egypt is enacted against a background of Herod audibly raging elsewhere.

In 1977, in Toronto, an attempt was finally and most successfully made to recreate the whole cycle on custom-built wagons, on the inspiration of the production in Leeds. There they found that wagons were easier to handle than anticipated, but discovered many other aspects of wagon performance which might otherwise have gone unobserved, particularly concerning the feasibility of performing on a stage 6 feet by 10 (2 metres by 3), and on the usefulness of long opening speeches to cover the period necessary to set up the wagon at a station. In short, what came to light was that the plays were as much custom-made for the method of presentation as vice versa. The production used eleven wagons, at three stations, finding that, in this way, it was possible to recycle each one. The basic superstructure,

therefore, was varied from wagon to wagon, but the groups added their own decorations—for instance a two-storey wagon with a lift was designed primarily for the *Creation*, the *Harrowing of Hell*, and the *Last Judgement*, whereas the *Crucifixion* wagon necessarily had no roof but was equipped to support the cross.

It is not our place to suggest that any one of the methods of modern production is necessarily better than another; all those mentioned enjoyed considerable success, and the city of York looks forward to many more productions of its plays, as the Festival every three or four years has now become as much a part of the civic calendar as Corpus Christi Day once was. Any production of the cycle is a most eloquent critique, be it as illumination of the effect of technical details in reconstruction, or the appreciation of an intrinsic theatrical quality which comes from a freer modern production. Indeed the success of the major adaptations and reconstructions of the York cycle testifies more than anything else to the broad power and unity of the original, transcending changing tastes in the theatre and fashions in belief.

#### Presentation of the Text

The plays were originally written in the Yorkshire dialect of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The scribe who copied them in their surviving form had, however, already begun to introduce modifications in the direction of the south-east Midland and London dialect, which eventually made the principal contribution to the development of modern standard English. The treatment of the text in the present selection is in some ways a wholesale extension of this process. Except where particularly glaring violations of rhyme would occur, the original words are given in their modern spellings. Certain old northern verbal inflections, such as indicative and imperative plural forms ending in *s*, have been replaced by their modern equivalents. An unavoidable effect of these procedures has been the occasional disruption of rhymes. For example, in the original one meets rhyme-sequences such as *sare:mare:care* and *blaw:knew:saw*, which in modernized form emerge as *sore:more:care* and *blow:know:saw* on the page—though of course for a modern reader with a good northern accent some of these effects naturally disappear when the lines are spoken out loud. Indeed, it is helpful to bear in mind that much of the vital force and dramatic colour of the language derives from its dialectal origins and demotic syntax, so that speaking the dialogue according to Received Pronunciation ('BBC' English) is apt to obscure some of its most distinctive qualities.



Archaic words, and modern words used in obsolete senses, are glossed at the foot of the page on their first appearance in each play, but not subsequently, unless they reappear with a different meaning or shade of meaning.

However, though the spellings of the words are now nearly all modern, the syntax must remain that of northern Middle English. Consequently, difficult or syntactically archaic phrases, lines, and groups of lines are also rendered in modern English at the foot of the page. Readers naturally vary in the amount of help they require in this respect, and we have attempted to steer a course between reasonable generosity and a weight of explanation that would encumber the text. We have not, for example, sought to render each and every inverted or syncopated expression (*him before* before him; *pass to place* go to [the] place), or every phatic phrase or rhyming tag (*both even and morn* both evening and morning, i.e. all the time). Again, it is worth considering that the plays were of course never intended for silent reading, and that many apparent awkwardnesses readily disappear when the verse is spoken. There is very little punctuation in the manuscript, and that inserted here is all editorial. It is somewhat heavier than is now customary in many scholarly editions of early texts. A plus-sign is used after a line-number in the footnotes to indicate a special feature of the text occurring between that line and the next, e.g. a missing line. Similarly, a minus-sign preceding a line-number signifies that a special feature precedes that line.

The Latin character-designations of the original are all given in English, and a few have been slightly simplified or made uniform. The original stage directions, which are nearly all in Latin, have been translated and retained in their places in the text, but no modern or editorial stage directions have been introduced. The vocabulary of scene setting, scene-division, entrance and exit is too often inappropriate to the manner of staging envisaged by the early dramatists. It is in any case difficult to insert without implying assumptions, quite possibly anachronistic, as to how the plays might have been presented. Moreover, given that very varied alternatives exist in many places as to the *mise en scène*, we have thought it best that readers and directors should attempt to reach their own conclusions on the basis of what is implicit in the dialogue, together with the factual information offered in the introduction.

## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

References to books and articles cited by the names of their authors elsewhere in this volume are given in full in the bibliography, which has been enlarged by the inclusion of many other items to serve as a guide to further reading. The sources of the plays are dealt with in a separate section at the end.

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## THE BARKERS = Tanners

### *The Fall of the Angels*

The Barkers' play depicts the first moments of the creation, the disobedience of Lucifer and the rebellious angels, and their fall into hell. Near the end, God resolves to create mankind to take the place in heaven of the fallen angels. The tone and language of the piece owe much to the first two chapters of Genesis, but the fall of Lucifer and the rebellious angels is an ancient apocryphal episode based on patristic expositions of several scattered biblical passages. The York dramatist adopted a restrained and symbolic treatment of the action, as compared with the more directly dramatic versions in the other cycles, where Lucifer is depicted as a usurper. (Here his offence is presented as a kind of inner or intellectual pride, and instead of being cast out by God, who remains silent at the climax, the rebellious angels fall spontaneously.)

The text provides for five speaking parts, but there were certainly other angels, good and rebellious. Some may have been trained singers, judging by the stage directions calling for quotations from the *Te deum*, particularly the *Sandus*, from the liturgy of Matins. The actors were probably costumed according to the conventions governing the representation of the subject in the visual arts of the period, with God of venerable appearance, probably in a golden mask, facial hair, and wig. Angels were often shown in white and gold, with wings, in costumes of leather coated with feathers. The rebellious angels were evidently able to effect a rapid change from this aspect to the conventional black-masked diabolic costumes for their scene in hell. It is not possible to infer a great deal about the *mise en scène* from the dialogue, beyond the fact that the action takes place on at least two levels, the rebellious angels falling from one to the other. At the lower level one may infer some contraption, doubtless the hell mouth often found in illustrations of the period, belching fire and smoke.

The verse used throughout the play is an eight-line alliterative stanza, abab, cddc. It is handled with some skill. God's sonorous and memorable opening gives way to an antiphonal section, where the boasts of the rebellious angels are cast as a crescendo, abruptly interrupted in mid-stanza and mid-line by their fall. Their style is echoed later in the cycle by various wicked characters such as Pharaoh, the Herods, and Pilate. The fragmentation of the stanza in lines 112-20 is aptly expressive of evil discord, a theme which runs throughout the cycle.

The Barkers, or Tanners, were concerned in the preparation of hides for manufacture into leather goods. They were evidently a numerous and prosperous trade in medieval York, and their prestige is perhaps reflected in their ownership of the first play in the cycle throughout its recorded career.



According to the Proclamation of 1415, performance of the cycle as a whole was scheduled to begin at 4.30 a.m., and in the giving of this first play at the first station the dramatist achieved a masterstroke of theatrical effect, combining the themes of creation and light with the dawning of Corpus Christi day.

*Knowledge of Latin*  
GOD: *Ego sum Alpha et O: vita, via, veritas, primus et novissimus.*

I am gracious and great God without beginning,  
I am maker unmade all might is in me;  
I am life, and way unto wealth-winning,  
I am foremost and first as I bid shall it be.  
My blessing of blee shall be blending,  
And hiending, from harm to be hiding,  
My body in bliss ay abiding,  
Unending, without any ending.

Since I am maker unmade, and most am of might,  
And ay shall be endless, and nought is but I,  
Unto my dignity dear shall duly be dight  
A place full of plenty, to my pleasing at ply;  
And therewith also will I have wrought  
Many diverse doings bedene,  
Which work shall meekly contain,  
And all shall be made even of nought.

But only the worthy work of my will  
In my spirit shall inspire the might of me;  
And in the first, faithfully, my thought to fulfil,  
Bainly in my blessing I bid at here be  
A bliss all-biending about me,  
In the which bliss I bid at be here  
Nine orders of angels full clear,  
In loving ay-lasting at lout me.

Then the angels sing 'We praise thee O God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.'

1 Ego . . . novissimus I am Alpha and Omega: the life, the way, the truth, the first and the last  
3 wealth-winning attainment of bliss  
5 The blessing of my countenance will be suffusing  
6 hiending pouring forth  
7 ay for ever  
11 dight created  
12 at ply to shape  
14 bedene immediately  
15 contain continue  
17-18 But my power shall inspire with my spirit only the worthy work of my will  
19 faithfully truly  
20 Bainly Immediately  
21 all-biending all-protecting  
24 loving praise  
ay-lasting eternal  
lout worship

*Living of  
Meaning*

Here underneath me now a nexile I neven,  
Which isle shall be earth. Now all be at once  
Earth wholly, and hell, this highest be heaven,  
And that wealth shall wield shall won in these wonnes.  
This grant I you, ministers mine,  
To-whiles ye are stable in thought—  
And also to them that are nought  
Be put to my prison at pine.

Of all the might I have made, most next after me  
I make thee as master and mirror of my might;  
I bield thee here bainly in bliss for to be,  
I name thee for Lucifer, as bearer of light.  
Nothing here shall thee be dering;  
In this bliss shall be your biending,  
And have all wealth in your wielding,  
Ay-whiles ye are buxomly bearing.

Then the angels sing 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts'.

SERAPHIM: Ah, merciful maker, full mickle is thy might,  
That all this work at a word worthily has wrought.  
Ay lofed be that lovely lord of his light,  
That us thus mighty has made that now was right nought,  
In bliss for to bide in his blessing.  
Ay-lasting in lof let us lout him,  
At bield us thus bainly about him,  
Of mirth nevermore to have missing.

LUCIFER: All the mirth that is made is marked in me!  
The beams of my brighthood are burning so bright,  
And I so seemly in sight myself now I see,  
For like a lord am I left to lend in this light.  
More fairer by far than my feres,  
In me is no point that may pair;

25 nexile wing, offshoot (= isle, 26) neven name 28 And that And [those]  
who dwell wonnes places 30 To-whiles As long as 31 And  
also to And also [I promise] to 32 at pine to suffer 33 mights powers  
35 bield establish bainly obediently 37 dering harming 38 biending  
dwelling 40 Ay-whiles So long as buxomly bearing behaving obediently  
41 mickle great 43 lofed praised of for 46 lof praise 47 At  
bield us To flourish 48 missing want 49 Lucifer MS has '1 Angelus  
Deficiens, Lucifer' marked shown 50 brighthood radiance 52 lend  
dwell 53 feres companions 54 pair deteriorate

*Becca -  
Hesounds  
like  
ass*

*Pride*



I feel me featous and fair,  
My power is passing my peers.

55

CHERUBIM: Lord, with a lasting lof we lof thee alone,  
Thou mightful maker that marked us and made us,  
And wrought us thus worthily to won in this wone,  
There never feeling of filth may foul us nor fade us.  
All bliss is here biolding about us;  
To-whiles we are stable in thought  
In the worship of him that us wrought,  
Of dere never thar us more dowte us.

60

2 ANGEL: Oh, what I am featous and fair and figured full fit!  
The form of all fairhead upon me is fest,  
All wealth in my wield is, I wot by my wit;  
The beams of my brighthead are bigged with the best.  
My showing is shimmering and shining,  
So bigly to bliss am I brought;  
Me needs for to noy me right nought,  
Here shall never pain me be pining.

65

70

SERAPHIM: With all the wit at we wield we worship thy will,  
Thou glorious God that is ground of all grace;  
Ay with steadfast steven let us stand still,  
Lord, to be fed with the food of thy fair face. *each. l.?*  
In life that is leally ay-lasting,  
The dole, Lord, is ay daintethly dealing,  
And whoso that food may be feeling—  
To see thy fair face—is not fasting.

75

80

LUCIFER: Oh, certes, what I am worthily wrought with worship,  
iwis!  
For in a glorious glee my glittering it gleams;  
I am so mightily made my mirth may not miss—

55 *featous* handsome 56 *passing* surpassing 58 *mightful* mighty marked  
created 60 *There* Where *feeling* perception (or perh. *filing* defilement) *fade*  
corrupt 61 *biolding* protecting We need never fear harm 65 2 Angel  
MS has '2 Angelus Deficiens' *figured* full fit well shaped 66 *form* appearance  
*fairhead* beauty *fest* fixed 67 *wield* power 68 *bigged* . . . best amongst  
the most beautiful 69 *showing* appearance 70 *bigly* securely 71 I  
need not be in the least concerned 72 *pinning* tormenting 73 at that 75 *steven*  
voice 77 *leally* loyally 78 Thy gift [of grace], Lord, thou art for ever  
bountifully bestowing 79 *feeling* tasting 81 *certes* truly *iwis* indeed  
82 *glee* radiance 83 *miss* fail

Ay shall I bide in this bliss through brightness of beams.  
Me needs not of noy for to neven,  
All wealth in my wield have I wielding;  
Above yet shall I be biolding,  
On height in the highest of heaven.

85

There shall I set myself full seemly to sight,  
To receive my reverence through right of renown;  
I shall be like unto him that is highest on height.  
Oh, what I am dearworth and deff—Oh, Deus! All goes down! *what effect here?*  
My might and my main is all marrand—  
Help, fellows! In faith, I am falland.

90

2 ANGEL: From heaven are we holding on all hand,  
To woe we are wending, I warrant.

95

LUCIFER: Out! Out! Harrow! Helpless, slike hot at is here;  
This is a dungeon of dole that I am to dight.  
Where is my kind become, so comely and clear?  
Now am I loathest, alas, that ere was light.  
My brightness is blackest and blo now,  
My bale is ay beeting and burning—  
That gars one go gowling and grinning.  
Out! Ay welaway! I well even in woe now.

100

2 DEVIL: Out! Out! I go wood for woe, my wit is all went now,  
All our food is but filth we find us befor. *rep.*  
We that were biolded in bliss, in bale are we burnt now—  
Out on thee, Lucifer, lurdan, our light hast thou lorn.  
Thy deeds to this dole now hast dight us,  
To spill us thou was our speeder,  
For thou was our light and our leader,  
The highest of heaven had thou hight us.

110

85-6 I need not mention harm, I enjoy all bliss at my behest 92 *dearworth* . . .  
*deft* worthy and exalted *Deus* God 93 *marrand* fading 94 *falland* fall-  
ing 95 *hiolding* . . . hand falling on every side 97 Lucifer MS has 'Lucifer,  
Diabolus in inferno' Out! Harrow! conventional fiendish eries I am helpless,  
there is such heat here 98 *dole* misery to dight thrust into 99 *Where* . . .  
*become* What has become of my nature 101 *blo* dark 102 *bale* . . . beeting  
misery is endlessly kindling 103 *gars one* makes me *gowling* wailing *grinning*  
grimacing 104 *welaway* alas *well* boil 105 *wood* mad *went* gone  
106 *us* befor before us 108 *lurdan* scoundrel *lorn* lost 110 *spill* harm  
speeder instigator 112 *hight* promised



LUCIFER: Welaway! Woe is me now, now is it worse than it was.

Unthrivingly threap ye—I said but a thought.

2 DEVIL: We! Lurdan, thou lost us.

LUCIFER: Ye lie! Out, alas!

I wist not this woe should be wrought.

Out on you, lurdans, ye smore me in smoke

2 DEVIL: This woe has thou wrought us.

LUCIFER: Ye lie! Ye lie!

2 DEVIL: Thou lies, and that shall thou buy.

LUCIFER: We! Lurdans, have at you, let look!

CHERUBIM: Ah, Lord, lofed be thy name that us this light lent,

Since Lucifer our leader is lighted so low,

For his unbuxomness in bale to be burnt—

Thy righteousness to reward on row

Ilk work after his wrought.

Through grace of thy merciful might

The cause I see it in sight,

Wherefor to bale he is brought.

GOD: Those fools for their fairhead in fantasies fell,

And had moan of my might that marked them and made them.

Forthy after their works were in woe shall they well,

For some are fallen into filth that evermore shall fade them,

And never shall have grace for to grith them.

So passing of power them thought them,

They would not me worship that wrought them;

Forthy shall my wrath ever go with them.

And all that me worship shall won here, iwis;

Forthy more forth of my work, work now I will.

Since then their might is formarred that meant all amiss,

Even to mine own figure this bliss to fulfil,

Mankind of mould will I make.

114 Unthrivingly Unprofitably threap chide 115 We diabolical cry lost  
ruined 116 wist knew 117 smore smother 119 buy pay for  
120 have . . . look let me get at you, see here 121 lent gave 122 lighted  
descended 123 unbuxomness disobedience 124-5 in being characteristic  
of thy righteousness duly to repay each deed according to its deserts 129 for  
because of 130 had moan complained 131 Forthy after Therefore according  
as 133 grith protect 138 more forth yet more 139 formarred completely  
destroyed 140 to in figure image fulfil replenish 141 mould earth

But first will I form him before  
All thing that shall him restore,  
To which that his talent will take.

And in my first making, to muster my might,  
Since earth is vain and void and murkness amell,  
I bid in my blessing ye angels give light  
To the earth, for it faded when the fiends fell.  
In hell shall never murkness be missing,  
The murkness thus name I for night;  
The day, that call I this light—  
My after-works shall they be wissing.

And now in my blessing I twin them in two,  
The night even from the day, so that they meet never,  
But either in a kind course their gates for to go.  
Both the night and the day, do duly your dever,  
To all I shall work be ye wissing.  
This day's work is done ilka deal,  
And all this work likes me right well,  
And bainly I give it my blessing.

142 him before before him 143 restore sustain 144 talent . . . take inclination  
will lead 145 muster display 146 vain empty murkness amell in utter  
darkness 152 after-works later creations missing guiding 153 twin part  
155 kind natural gates ways 156 dever duty 158 ilka deal in every  
respect 159 likes pleases



## THE COOPERS

### *The Fall of Man*

The Coopers were manufacturers and repairers of such items as barrels, buckets, and tubs. In York the street-name Coppergate may indicate where they were concentrated in the city. Their play initiates the human drama of the cycle. It sets in motion the chain of events which, though it is answered by Christ's sacrifice in the Passion, continues to implicate the audience in the present, its consequences not being finally exhausted until the Last Judgement. The piece is cast in an eleven-line stanza rhyming abab,c, bc, dcde,, unique in the cycle as it survives.

The play departs from the elevated style of *The Fall of the Angels*, and, in its human and psychological approach to the characters, is closer to the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman play the *Mystère d'Adam* than to the large body of theological commentary associated with the scriptural source in Genesis 3. The play opens with the return of Satan, who adds envy and anger to pride in his catalogue of sin. Curiously, his envy is directed at man not because he is God's new favourite, but because he already knows that God himself intends to take man's form. This suggests a belief that the Incarnation was not dependent on the Fall, which Rosemary Woolf points out was an unorthodox view peculiar to the Franciscans.

It is not the doctrinal element in the play which is most striking, however, so much as the playwright's handling of tonal shifts, for instance when Satan assumes the guise of the adder. The text is reticent as to how Satan went 'in a worm's likeness', there being no stage direction to indicate whether he simply assumed an ophidian manner or whether he changed costume in front of the audience as he spoke. There was a strong iconographic tradition that Satan appeared to Eve as a serpent with a woman's face. Whatever the dramatist here intended to create visually, verbally he achieves some subtly realized dialogue as the serpent proceeds to flatter, seduce, and bully Eve into eating the fruit. In a similar vein, he shortly afterwards devises the first domestic quarrel in the cycle, as Adam turns on his wife for deluding him with 'trifles'. Their wrangling, coinciding with their fall, presages the discord which is thematically associated with evil throughout the cycle. Adam is not of particularly impressive moral stature in this play: he accepts the fruit for the same selfish reasons as Eve, rather than out of love for her. Later, when God confronts him with his crime, far from presenting an example of contrition, Adam peevishly blames his wife. The play, faithful to its source in Genesis, derives its strength from balanced dramatic dialogue, rather than doctrinal niceties.

SATAN: For woe my wit is in a were  
That moves me mickle in my mind;  
The Godhead that I saw so clear,  
And perceived that he should take kind  
Of a degree  
That he had wrought, and I dedigned  
That angel kind should it not be;  
And we were fair and bright,  
Therefore me thought that he  
The kind of us ta'en might,  
And thereat dedigned me.

The kind of man he thought to take  
And thereat had I great envy,  
But he has made to him a make,

And hard to her I will me hie  
That ready way,  
That purpose proof to put it by,  
And fand to pick from him that prey.  
My travail were well set  
Might I him so betray,  
His liking for to let,  
And soon I shall assay.

In a worm's likeness will I wend  
And fand to feign a loud leasing.  
Eve, Eve.

EVE: Who is there?

SATAN: I, a friend.

And for thy good is the coming  
I hither sought.

Of all the fruit that ye see hang  
In paradise, why eat ye nought?

EVE: We may of them ilkone

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| 1 My wits are in a turmoil of rage         | 2 mickle greatly                        | 3 that I that [once] I   |
| 4 take kind assume [the] nature            | 5 degree order of beings (i.e. mankind) | 6 wrought  |
| created                                    | dedigned was offended                   | 7 angel kind of angelic nature   |
| 10 Might                                   | 11 dedigned me I was offended           | 14 make mate   |
| 15 hard quickly                            | me hie go                               | 17-19 In order to thwart that fixed plan, and try to steal that prey from him. My time would be well spent |
| 21 liking pleasure                         | 22 assay make the attempt               | 23 worm's serpent's  |
| 24 And attempt to fabricate a flagrant lie | 29 nought none                          | 30 ilkone each one   |



Take all that us good thought,  
Save a tree out is ta'en,  
Would do harm to nigh it aught.

SATAN: And why that tree, that would I wit,  
Any more than all other by?

EVE: For our Lord God forbids us it,  
The fruit thereof, Adam nor I  
To nigh it near;

And if we did we both should die,  
He said, and cease our solace sere.

SATAN: Yah, Eve, to me take tent;  
Take heed and thou shalt hear  
What that the matter meant  
He moved on that manner.

To eat thereof he you defend  
I know it well, this was his skill:  
Because he would none other kened  
These great virtues that long theretill.  
For will thou see,  
Who eats the fruit, of good and ill  
Shall have knowing as well as he.

EVE: Why what-kin thing art thou  
That tells this tale to me?

SATAN: A worm, that wotteth well how  
That ye may worshipped be.

EVE: What worship should we win thereby?  
To eat thereof us needeth it nought,  
We have lordship to make mastery  
Of all thing that on earth is wrought.

SATAN: Woman, do way!  
To greater state ye may be brought  
And ye will do as I shall say.

31 Take all that seems good to us 32 out . . . ta'en is excepted 33 It  
would be harmful to go anywhere near it 34 wit know 35 other by others  
near by 38 nigh approach 40 cease [to enjoy] our various pleasures  
41 take tent pay attention 43-4 What he meant by expressing himself like that  
45 defend forbad 46 skill reason 47 kened knew 48 long theretill  
belong therein 49 will thou do you not 50 ill evil 52 what-kin what  
kind of 54 wotteth knows 57 us . . . nought we have no need 58 make  
exercise 59 Of Over 60 do way enough of this 62 And If

change in  
dictate to  
reflect  
class

EVE: To do is is full loath  
That should our God mispay.  
SATAN: Nay, certes, it is no wothe,  
Eat it safely ye may.

For peril right there none in lies,  
But worship and a great winning,  
For right as God ye shall be wise  
And peer to him in all-kin thing.  
Aye, gods shall ye be,  
Of ill and good to have knowing,  
For to be as wise as he.

EVE: Is this sooth that thou says?

SATAN: Yea, why trows thou not me?  
I would by no-kins ways  
Tell nought but truth to thee.

Then will I to thy teaching trust  
And fang this fruit unto our food.

Then she should accept the apple.

SATAN: Bite on boldly, be not abashed,  
And bear Adam to amend his mood  
And eke his bliss.

Then Satan goes away.

EVE: Adam, have here of fruit full good.

ADAM: Alas woman, why took thou this?

Our Lord commanded us both  
To tent the tree of his.

Thy work will make him wroth—  
Alas, thou hast done amiss.

EVE: Nay, Adam, grieve thee not at it,  
And I shall say the reason why.

63 We will not do anything 64 mispay displease 65 certes indeed wothe  
danger 67 For there is not the slightest danger therein 68 worship honour  
winning gain 69 right just 70 all-kin every kind of 74 sooth true  
75 trows believes 76 no-kins ways no means 79 fang take 81-2 And  
take [some] to Adam to improve his disposition and enhance his happiness 86 tent  
pay heed to

kin +  
Kynale



A worm has done me for to wit  
 We shall be as gods, thou and I,  
 If that we eat  
 Here of this tree; Adam, forthy  
 Let not that worship for to get.  
 For we shall be as wise  
 As God that is so great,  
 And as mickle of price;  
 Forthy eat of this meat.

ADAM: To eat it would I not eschew  
 Might I be sure in thy saying.

EVE: Bite on boldly, for it is true,  
 We shall be gods and know all thing.

ADAM: To win that name  
 I shall it taste at thy teaching.

*And he accepts and eats.*

Alas, what have I done, for shame!  
 Ill counsel, woe worth thee!  
 Ah Eve, thou art to blame,  
 To this enticed thou me—  
 Me shames with my lichame,

For I am naked as methink,  
 EVE: Alas Adam, right so am I,  
 ADAM: And for sorrow sere why ne might we sink,

For we have grieved God almighty  
 That made me man—  
 Broken his bidding bitterly.  
 Alas that ever we it began.  
 This work, Eve, hast thou wrought,  
 And made this bad bargain.

EVE: Nay Adam, wite me nought.

ADAM: Do way, lief Eve, whom then?

91 done . . . wit informed me 94 forthy therefore 95 Let not Do not fail  
 98 mickle of price exalted 99 meat food 101 Might I assure myself of the  
 truth of what you say 105 teaching instigation 107 Evil adviser, a curse  
 on you 110-11 I am ashamed of my body, for it seems to me I am naked  
 113 Now for manifold sorrows, why might we not sink [into the ground]  
 116 bitterly wickedly 120 wite blame nought not 121 lief dear

EVE: The worm to wite well worthy were,  
 With tales untrue he me betrayed.

ADAM: Alas that I let at thy lore  
 Or trowed the trifles that thou me said.  
 So may I bid,

For I may ban that bitter braid  
 And dreary deed, that I it did.  
 Our shape for dole me deaves,  
 Wherewith shall they be hid?

EVE: Let us take there fig leaves,  
 Sithen it is thus betid.

ADAM: Right as thou says so shall it be,  
 For we are naked and all bare;  
 Full wonder fain I would hide me  
 From my Lord's sight, and I wist where.  
 Were I ne rought!

GOD: Adam, Adam.

ADAM: Lord.

GOD: Where art thou, yare?

ADAM: I hear thee Lord and see thee nought.

GOD: Say, whereon is it long,

This work why hast thou wrought?

ADAM: Lord, Eve gart me do wrong  
 And to that brigue me brought

GOD: Say, Eve, why has thou gart thy make  
 Eat fruit I bade thee should hang still,  
 And commanded none of it to take?

EVE: A worm, Lord, enticed me theretill;  
 So welaway,  
 That ever I did that deed so dill.

GOD: Ah, wicked worm, woe worth thee ay,

122 The serpent surely deserves the blame 124 let . . . lore heeded your advice  
 125 trowed . . . trifles believed the idle tales said told 126 Now may I beg  
 [for mercy] 127 ban . . . braid curse that terrible impulse 128 dreary  
 wicked 129-30 I am stunned by shock at our appearance; what can we conceal  
 them (our bodies) with? 131 take put 132 Since it has happened thus  
 135 Full . . . fain Most gladly 136 and . . . where if [only] I knew where  
 137 Would that nobody heeded me 138 yare quickly 140 Tell me, what  
 is the reason for it 142 gart made 143 brigue plight 144-45 Tell  
 me, Eve, why have you caused your partner to eat the fruit which I said should for ever  
 remain hanging 148 welaway alas 149 dill foolish 150 woe . . . ay a curse  
 on you for ever



For thou on this manner  
Hast made them swilk affray:  
My malison have thou here  
With all the might I may.

And on thy womb then shall thou glide,  
And be ay full of enmity  
To all mankind on ilka side,  
And earth it shall thy sustenance be  
To eat and drink.  
Adam and Eve also, ye  
In earth then shall sweat and swink,  
And travail for your food.

ADAM: Alas, when might we sink?  
We that have all world's good,  
Full derfly may us think.

GOD: Now, Cherubim, mine angel bright,  
To middle-earth tite go drive these two.

ANGEL: All ready, Lord, as it is right,  
Since thy will is that it be so,  
And thy liking.

Adam and Eve, do you two go,  
For here may ye make no dwelling;  
Go ye forth fast to fare,  
Of sorrow may ye sing.

ADAM: Alas for sorrow and care  
Our hands may we wring.

151 For Because	on in	152 swilk affray	such trouble	153 malison
curse	154 might power	155 womb belly	156 ay for ever	157 on
... side in every place	161 swink work	162 travail labour		165 We
may consider ourselves most wretched	167 tite quickly	168 All ready		
Willingly	173 fare travel			

## THE SHIPWRIGHTS

### *The Building of the Ark*

York is unique amongst the extant cycles in dividing the story of Noah into two episodes, the Building of the Ark, and the Flood. The prominence this gives to the Shipwrights in both the action and the spirit of their play provides one of the cycle's most striking blends of the quotidian with the eternal. God resolves to destroy his sinful creation with a flood, sparing only Noah and his family. He calls upon the astonished Noah to build a ship, and it appears that a representation of a vessel took shape before the audience's eyes in the course of the play. The action is based on events narrated in Genesis 6 and 7, and much is made in the dialogue of the construction of the Ark, especially the details of its dimensions. This is partly because of the Ark's great symbolic significance: as the vessel of salvation it was amongst the Old Testament's most important prefigurations of the Christian Church. The York dramatist, however, also developed his source material in a different way alongside the spiritual meaning of the events. An adroit blend of humour, wonder, and some technical vocabulary drawn from the medieval shipwright's craft, presents Noah as at one moment the ancient biblical patriarch, reeling comically at God's amazing and peremptory command, and then charts his transformation through grace into a skilled contemporary shipwright. At the centre of the play is a demonstration of the Shipwrights' craft which is at the same time a sanctification of it by association with God's scheme of salvation.

God's instructions (lines 72–88) and Noah's demonstrative speech which follows (89–119) embody terms suggesting that the Ark is a medieval clinker-built vessel. Clinker-building involved the laying down of a frame made up of the keel and cross-ribs of the vessel. On to this were nailed the strakes, rows of horizontal overlapping planks, making up the hull. The gaps between the strakes, the seams, were caulked with waterproof substances. Whilst Noah demonstrates some of these aspects of shipwrightry, it appears that prefabricated sections of the Ark are brought together around him, for both he and God refer to the completed vessel near the end.

Though the stanza employed throughout is a relatively unadorned alternately rhyming octave, the style of the piece is nevertheless unobtrusively literary. A thread of diction, running throughout the play, is established by the repetition of words like 'work' (noun and verb), 'wrought', 'make', and so on. It is applied first to God, the divine artificer, and then conveyed, with his power, to Noah, the biblical-medieval craftsman. The puns on 'mark(s)' (lines 64, 68) and 'craft' (150) should not be overlooked, the latter particularly as it sums up several levels of meaning in the play: the craft of the biblical Noah and the York Shipwrights, itself a mundane reflex of the divine creative power; and the craft which they have built, the Ark.



GOD: First when I wrought this world so wide,  
 Wood and wind and waters wan,  
 Heaven and hell was not to hide,  
 With herbs and grass thus I began.  
 In endless bliss to be and bide  
 And to my likeness made I man,  
 Lord and sire on ilka side  
 Of all middle earth I made him then.

5

A woman also with him wrought I,  
 All in law to lead their life,  
 I bad them wax and multiply,  
 To fulfil this world, without strife.  
 Sithen have men wrought so woefully  
 And sin is now reigning so rife,  
 That me repents and rues forthy  
 That ever I made either man or wife.

10

15

work  
of  
shipw.

But since they make me to repent  
 My work I wrought so well and true,  
 Without cease will not assent,  
 But ever is bound more bale to brew.  
 But for their sins they shall be shent  
 And fordone wholly, hide and hue;  
 Of them shall no more be meant,  
 But work this work I will all new.

20

All new I will this world be wrought  
 And waste away that wons therein;  
 A flood above them shall be brought  
 To stroy middle earth, both more and min.  
 But Noah alone, leave shall it nought  
 Till all be sunken for their sin;  
 He and his sons, this is my thought,  
 And with their wives away shall win.

25

30

2. man dark 3. not to hide plain to see 6. And Then 7. sire ruler  
 ilka every 11. wax flourish 12. fulfil people 13. Sithen Since then  
 14. reigning so rife flourishing so abundantly 15. That therefore I repent and  
 regret 19-20 [They are] continually disobedient, and always ready to stir up  
 more trouble 21. shent destroyed 22. fordone brought to ruin hide and  
 hue in every respect 23. meant said 26. And those who dwell here shall  
 be destroyed 27. above over 28. stroy destroy both . . . min entirely  
 29. Except for Noah, nothing will be spared 31. thought intention 32. wint escape

Noah, my servant sad and clean,  
 For thou art stable in stead and stall,  
 I will thou work without ween  
 A work to save thyself withal.

35

NOAH: Oh, mercy, Lord, what may this mean?

GOD: I am thy God of great and small  
 Is come to tell thee of thy teen,  
 And what ferly shall after fall.

40

NOAH: Ah, Lord, I lof thee loud and still,  
 That unto me—wretch unworthy—  
 Thus with thy word, as is thy will,  
 Likes to appear thus properly.

GOD: Noah, as I bid thee, do fulfil:

A ship I will have wrought in hie;  
 All-if thou can little skill,  
 Take it in hand, for help shall I.

growth/development  
a craft

NOAH: Ah, worthy Lord, would thou take heed,  
 I am full old and out of quart,  
 That me list do no day's deed  
 But if great mister me gart.

50

GOD: Begin my work behoves thee need  
 And thou will pass from pains smart,  
 I shall thee succour and thee speed  
 And give thee heal in head and heart.

55

I see such ire among mankind  
 That of their works I will take wrake;  
 They shall be sunken for their sin,  
 Therefore a ship I will thou make.  
 Thou and thy sons shall be therein,  
 They shall be saved for thy sake.  
 Therefore go boldly and begin  
 Thy measures and thy marks to take.

60

33. sad sober clean pure 34. stead and stall every respect 35-6 I command  
 that you take care to perform a piece of work whereby to save yourself 39. teen  
 trouble 40. ferly marvel fall happen 41. lof give thanks to loud and  
 still continually 44. Likes is pleased properly in person 46. in hie quickly  
 47. Even though you have little skill [in shipbuilding] 50. quart healthy condition  
 51-2 So that I should be disinclined to do a day's work unless great need constrained  
 me 53-4 You must needs begin my work if you mean to escape from severe  
 afflictions 55. speed assist 56. heal health 57. ire sinful turmoil 58. wrake  
 vengeance 64. marks dimensions



NOAH: Ah, Lord, thy will shall ever be wrought,  
As counsel gives of ilka clerk,  
But first, of ship-craft can I right nought,  
Of their making have I no mark.

GOD: Noah, I bid thee heartily, have no thought,  
I shall thee wis in all thy work,  
And even till it to end be wrought;  
Therefore to me take heed and hark.

Take high trees and hew them clean,  
All by square and not of squin,  
Make of them boards and wands between,  
Thus thrivingly, and not over-thin.  
Look that thy seams by subtly seen  
And nailed well that they not twin;  
Thus I devise ilk deal bedene,  
Therefore do forth, and leave thy din.

Three hundred cubits it shall be long,  
And fifty broad, all for thy bliss;  
The height, of thirty cubits strong,  
Look leally that thou think on this.  
Thus give I thee gradely ere I gang  
Thy measures, that thou do not miss.  
Look now that thou work not wrong  
Thus witterly since I thee wis.

NOAH: Ah, blissful Lord, that all may bield,  
I thank thee heartily both ever and ay;  
Five hundred winters I am of eld—  
Methink these years as yesterday!  
Full weak I was and all unwield,  
My weariness is went away,  
To work this work here in this field  
All by myself I will assay.

66 So every learned man advises 67 of . . . nought I know nothing about ship-  
building 68 mark skill 69 heartily earnestly have no thought do not  
worry 70 wis guide 73 clean neatly 74 Squarely, and not on a  
slant 75 and wands between with battens to go between 76 thrivingly skilfully  
77 seams gaps between planks making up hull subtly seen carefully attended to  
78 twin come apart 79 deal thing bedene altogether 80 do forth get  
on with it leave thy din say no more 84 leally truly 85 gradely carefully  
gang go 86 miss err 88 witterly surely 89 blissful blessed bield protect  
91 eld age 93 unwield feeble 94 went gone 96 assay endeavour

To hew this board I will begin,  
But first I will lay on my line;  
Now bud it be all inlike thin,  
So that it neither twin nor twine.  
Thus shall I join it with a gin  
And sadly set it with simmon fine:  
Thus shall I work it both more and min  
Through teaching of God, master mine.

More subtly can no man sew;  
It shall be clinked everilka deal  
With nails that are both noble and new,  
Thus shall I fast it fast to feal.  
Take here a rivet, and there a rew,  
With these the bow now work I well;  
This work I warrant both good and true.

Full true it is, who will take tent,  
But fast my force begins to fold.  
A hundred winters away is went  
Since I began this work, full gradely told,  
And in such travail for to be bent  
Is hard to him that is thus old.  
But he that to me these messages sent,  
He will be my bield, thus am I bold.

GOD: Noah, this work is near an end,  
And wrought right as I warned thee.  
But yet in manner it must be mend,  
Therefore this lesson learn at me:  
For diverse beasts therein must lend,  
And fowls also in their degree,

98 line measuring line 99 bud must inlike equally 100 twine warp  
101 gin tool 102 And carefully secure it with good cement (sc. substance used  
for caulking seams) 103 both . . . min in every respect 104+ Line missing  
in MS 105 subtly skilfully sew join seams 106 clinked clenched everilka  
deal in each and every part 107 noble fine 108 Thus shall I fasten it  
tightly, to cover [it] (i.e. the hull) 109 Take Put rew rove, burr 112 tent  
note 113 force strength fold ebb 115 full . . . told most carefully  
enumerated 116 bent exerting oneself 119 bield support bold bold  
[to assert] 121 warned instructed 122 manner a certain respect mend  
improved 123 at from 124 lend dwell 125 degree appropriate place



And for that they shall not sam blend  
Diverse stages must there be.

And when that it is ordained so  
With diverse stalls and stages sere,  
Of ilka kind thou shall take two,  
Both male and female fare in fere. 130  
Thy wife, thy sons, with thee shall go,  
And their three wives, without were;  
These eight bodies, without mo,  
Shall thus be saved on this manner. 135

Therefore to my bidding be bain,  
Till all be harboured, haste thee fast;  
After the seventh day shall it rain  
Till forty days be fully past.  
Take with thee gear such as may gain 140  
To man and beast, their lives to last.  
I shall thee succour for certain  
Till all thy care away be cast.

NOAH: Ah, Lord, that ilka miss may mend,  
I lof thy lore both loud and still, 145  
I thank thee both with heart and hend  
That me will help from angers ill.  
About this work now bus me wend,  
With beasts and fowls my ship to fill.  
He that to me this craft has kened, 150  
He wis us with his worthy will.

126 for so	129 sere various	131 fare in fere going together	127 stages compartments	128 ordained
arranged	134 mo more	136 bain obedient	137 harboured lodged	133 were doubt
provisions	144 miss fault	141 last sustain	143 care . . . cast	140 gear
are over	147 angers ill severe troubles	145 I praise your counsel ceaselessly	146 hend	142 tribulations
hands		148 bus . . . wend must I go	150 kened	
taught				

## THE FISHERS AND MARINERS

### The Flood

The Flood prefigures the second and final destruction of the world at the Last Judgement, an event to which Noah himself alludes near the end of the play (lines 299 ff.). He was, according to Genesis 6:9, the sole righteous man who 'walked with God', and in the play he and his sons and daughters-in-law are presented as models of godly rectitude and obedience. Much of the dramatic tension and life of the piece is generated by the contrast between Noah's formidable wife and the rest of the family. The tradition of her disobedience was rooted in Eastern legend, which told that, as had been the case with Eve, her violation of the natural order was due to the temptations of Satan, who sought once again to thwart God's plan through the agency of a woman. The York dramatist was clearly aware of both the figural and the comic potential of her role in the action. The celebrated scene of her domestic fisticuffs with Noah and the others is quickly followed by her complete quiescence upon entering the Ark, the entire episode being figurally interpreted as the reluctance of the hardened sinner to enter the Church until the moment of death. Her muted contributions in the latter half of the play, first a brief lamentation for her lost friends, then a qualm lest the universal destruction of fire is about to follow immediately, are touchingly set off against the unwavering zeal of Noah.

The play is written in a comparatively elaborate fourteen-line stanza, abababab,cdcccd,, which lends itself well to the choric resignation, prayer, and thanksgiving of Noah's family as they move through suffering to salvation. Yet by means of dividing a number of lines between speakers and by using contrasting diction, the form is also shown to be sufficiently flexible to present some lively demotic exchanges between Noah's wife and the rest of the family. No stage directions exist to show how flood, animals, raven, dove, and rainbow were managed in performance. Some clues may be gathered from the versions in the Chester cycle and the Towneley manuscript, which are more explicit in this area. Clear indications of movement and positioning of characters are, however, embedded in the dialogue. For instance, in the passage after line 75, Noah is on the Ark/pageant-wagon, whilst his wife is in the street below, and their positioning in relation to each other offers implicit correction to the inverted hierarchy which she is at pains to maintain. The sole stage direction in the play, that near the end the family should all sing, signals the final restoration of harmony at all levels.

The appropriateness of the *Flood* to the Fishers and Mariners need not be laboured. Fish was a very significant element in the medieval diet, partly because meat was quite frequently forbidden owing to religious observances,



and was in any case difficult to keep. York had large fishmarkets and numerous fishermen. The Mariners' or Shipmen's trade was chiefly distributive; they handled the river traffic between Hull, York, and the upper reaches of the Ouse.

NOAH: That Lord that lives ay-lasting life,

I lof thee ever with heart and hand,

That me would rule by reason rife,

Six hundred years to live in land.

Three seemly sons and a worthy wife

I have ever at my steven to stand;

But now my cares are keen as knife,

Because I ken what is comand.

There comes to ilk country,

Yea, cares both keen and cold.

For God has warned me

This world wasted shall be,

And certes the sooth I see,

As forefathers have told.

My father Lamech who, likes to neven,

Here in this world thus long gan lend,

Seven hundred years, seventy and seven,

In such a space his time he spend.

He prayed to God with stable steven

That he to him a son should send,

And at the last there came from heaven

Such hetting that him mickle amend,

And made him grub and grave

As ordained fast before,

For he a son should have,

As he gan after crave;

And as God vouchsave

In world then was I born.

- 1 *ay-lasting* everlasting      2 *lof* praise      3-4 Who, according to abundant  
reason, ordains that I should live on earth for six hundred years      6 I have per-  
petually at my command      7 *keen* sharp      8 *ken* know      comand to come  
9 *ilk* every      13 And I perceive the truth indeed      15 *likes* . . . *neven*  
it is suitable to mention      16 *thus* . . . *lend* lived this long      18 *spend* spent  
19 *stable steven* steady voice      22 Words of promise that were greatly to improve  
his lot      23 *grub* dig      grave delve      24 *fast* firmly      before beforehand  
26 What he longed for      27 *vouchsave* condescended

*Noah's  
hist/spell  
why?  
w/like reflecting  
on future*

When I was born Noah named he me,  
And said these words with mickle win:

'Lo', he said, 'this ilk is he

That shall be comfort to mankind.'

Sirs, by this well wit may ye,

My father knew both more and min

By certain signs he could well see,

That all this world should sink for sin;

How God should vengeance take,

As now is seen certain,

And end of mankind make,

That sin would not forsake;

And how that it should slake,

And a world wax again.

I would God it wasted were,

So that I should not tent theretill.

My seemly sons and daughters dear,

Take ye intent unto my skill.

1 SON: Father, we are all ready here,

Your bidding bainly to fulfil.

NOAH: Go call your mother, and come near,

And speed us fast that we not spill.

1 SON: Father, we shall not fine

Till your bidding be done.

NOAH: All that lives under line

Shall, son, sooner pass to pine.

1 SON: Where are ye, mother mine?

Come to my father soon.

WIFE: What says thou, son?

1 SON: Mother, certain

My father thinks to flit full far.

He bids you hasten with all your main

Unto him, that nothing you mar.

- 30 *mickle* win great joy      31 *ilk* same      33 Sirs, by this you may well under-  
stand      34 *min* less      41 *slake* end      42 *wax* grow      44 So that I  
would not have to attend to it      46 Pay attention to my purpose      48 *bainly*  
readily      49 *near* back      50 Let us hurry up so that we are not destroyed  
51 *fine* pause      53 *lives* under line lives      54 *sooner* in a short time      *pine*  
torment      56 *soon* at once      58 *flit* . . . *far* remove far away      59 *main*  
strength      60 so that nothing harms you or so that you do not spoil anything



WIFE: Yah, good son, hie thee fast again  
 And tell him I will come no nar.  
 1 SON: Dame, I would do your bidding fain,  
 But you bus wend, else be it war.  
 WIFE: War? That would I wit.  
 We bourd all wrong, I ween. 65  
 1 SON: Mother, I say you yet,  
 My father is bound to flit.  
 WIFE: Now certes, I shall not sit  
 Ere I see what he mean. 70  
 1 SON: Father, I have done now as ye command,  
 My mother comes to you this day.  
 NOAH: She is welcome, I well warrand;  
 This world shall soon be wasted away.  
 WIFE: Where art thou Noah?  
 NOAH: Lo, here at hand. 75  
 Come hither fast, dame, I thee pray.  
 WIFE: Trows thou that I will leave the hard land  
 And turn up here on tor deray?  
 Nay, Noah, I am not boun  
 To fond now over these fells. 80  
 Do bairns, go we and truss to town.  
 NOAH: Nay, certes, soothly then mun ye drown.  
 WIFE: In faith, thou were as good come down  
 And go do somewhat else.  
 NOAH: Dame, forty days are near-hand past 85  
 And gone since it began to rain,  
 On life shall no man longer last  
 But we alone, is not to lain.  
 WIFE: Now, Noah, in faith thou fons full fast,  
 This fare will I no longer frayne; 90  
 61 *hie . . . again* go quickly back again 62 *nar* nearer 63 *fain* gladly  
 64 But you ought to go or else things will be worse 65-6 Worse? I should like  
 to see that. I believe we are barking up the wrong tree 68 *is . . . flit* is sure to be  
 on the move 69-70 Now, indeed, I shall not rest until I find out what he  
 means (by this) 73 *warrand* affirm 77-8 Do you believe that I will leave  
 dry land and get up here in such complete confusion? 79 *boun* prepared 80 To  
 set out now over these hills 81 *Do* come on *bairns* children *truss* depart  
 82 *certes* indeed *soothly* truly *mun* must 83-4 In faith, you might as well  
 come down and do something worthwhile 85 *near-hand* nearly 88 *is . . .*  
*lain* it is not to be concealed 89 *thou . . . fast* you are acting extremely foolishly  
 90 *fare* matter *frayne* enquire into

Thou art near wood, I am aghast,  
 Farewell, I will go home again.  
 NOAH: Oh, woman, art thou wood?  
 Of my works thou nought wot;  
 All that has bone or blood  
 Shall be over flowed with the flood. 95  
 WIFE: In faith, thou were as good  
 To let me go my gate.  
 We! Out! Harrow!  
 NOAH: What now, what cheer?  
 WIFE: I will no nar for no-kins need. 100  
 NOAH: Help, my sons, to hold her here,  
 For to her harms she takes no heed.  
 2 SON: Be merry mother, and mend your cheer;  
 This world be drowned, without dread.  
 WIFE: Alas, that I this lore should lere. 105  
 NOAH: Thou spills us all, ill might thou speed.  
 3 SON: Dear mother, won with us,  
 There shall nothing you grieve.  
 WIFE: Nay, needlings home me bus,  
 For I have tools to truss. 110  
 NOAH: Woman, why does thou thus?  
 To make us more mischief?  
 WIFE: Noah, thou might have let me wit.  
 Early and late thou went thereout,  
 And ay at home thou let me sit  
 To look that nowhere were well about. 115  
 NOAH: Dame, thou hold me excused of it,  
 It was God's will without doubt.  
 WIFE: What, weens thou so for to go quit?  
 Nay, by my troth, thou gets a clout. 120  
 91 *wood* mad I . . . aghast I fear 94 you understand nothing 97-8 In  
 faith, you may as well let me go my way 99 *We! Out! Harrow!* conventional  
 exclamation of distress *what cheer?* what's the matter? 100 *for . . . need* on any  
 account 102 For she does not seem to care about the peril she is in 103 *mend*  
 . . . cheer cheer up 104 *without dread* undoubtedly 105 Alas that I should  
 learn this information 106 A curse on you, you'll be the death of us all 107 *won*  
 stay 109-10 No, I have to go home because I have utensils to gather together  
 111-12 Woman, why are you behaving like this? To do us more harm? 113 *wit*  
 know 116 To make sure that everything was all right nowhere (i.e. wasting  
 time) 119 What, do you believe that you will get away with that? 120 *clout*  
 blow



NOAH: I pray thee dame, be still.

Thus God would have it wrought.

WIFE: Thou should have wit my will,

If I would assent theretill,

And Noah, for that same skill,

This bargain shall be bought. 125

Now at first I find and feel

Where thou hast to the forest sought,

Thou should have told me for our sele

When we were to such bargain brought. 130

NOAH: Now dame, thou tharf not dread a deal,

For to account it cost thee nought.

A hundred winters, I wot well,

Are went since I this work had wrought. 135

And when I made ending,

God gave me measure fair

Of every-ilka thing;

He bad that I should bring

Of beasts and fowls young,

Of ilka kind a pair. 140

WIFE: Nowe certes, and we should scape from scathe

And so be saved as ye say here,

My co-mothers and my cousins both,

Them would I went with us in fere. 145

NOAH: To wend in the water it were wothe,

Look in and look without were.

WIFE: Alas, my life me is full loath;

I live over-long this lore to lere. 150

1 DAUGHTER: Dear mother, mend your mood,

For we shall wend you with. 150

123 wit found out 124 theretill to it 125 skill cause 126 You will  
pay the penalty for these goings-on 127 at first for the first time feel perceive  
128 Why you have resorted to the forest 129 sele well-being 130 bargain  
undertaking 131 tharf... deal you need have no fear 132 For in financial  
terms it cost you nothing. 134 Have passed since I began to perform this task.  
136 measure fair clear indication 137 Of every single thing 141 if we  
are to escape harm 143-4 I should like both my gossips and my relatives to  
accompany us 145 wend go wothe dangerous 146 Come in without  
more ado 147-8 Alas my life is very burdensome to me, I have lived too long  
to receive this news 149 MS has I Filia—the three young women are, of course,  
Noah's sons' wives.

WIFE: My friends that I from yode

Are over flowed with flood.

2 DAUGHTER: Now thank we God all good

That us has granted grith. 155

3 DAUGHTER: Mother, of this work now would ye not ween,

That all should worth to waters wan. 155

2 SON: Father, what may this marvel mean?

Whereto made God middle-earth and man?

1 DAUGHTER: So selcouth sight was never none seen,

Since first that God this world began. 160

NOAH: Wend and spear your doors bedene,

For better counsel none I can.

This sorrow is sent for sin,

Therefore to God we pray

That he our bale would blin. 165

3 SON: The king of all mankind

Out of this woe us win,

As thou art Lord, that may.

1 SON: Yea, lord, as thou let us be born

In this great bale, some boot us bid. 170

NOAH: My sons, see ye midday and morn

To these cattle take good heed;

Keep them well with hay and corn;

And women, fang these fowls and feed,

So that they be not lightly lorn

As long as we this life shall lead. 175

2 SON: Father, we are full fain

Your bidding to fulfil.

Nine months passed are plain

Since we were put to pain. 180

3 SON: He that is most of main

May mend it when he will.

151 yode went 154 grith protection 155 ween believe 156 That all  
should be covered in dark water 158 Whereto To what end 159 selcouth  
remarkable 161 Go and shut your doors immediately 162 can know  
165 That he would put an end to our trouble 169-70 as you allowed us to be  
born into these troubled circumstances, give us some help 171 see make sure  
174 look after and feed these birds 175 lightly lorn carelessly lost 179 plain  
fully 180 subjected to torment

Wife's lost → mouse  
learn how to mouse  
what God could  
cans...  
— nah



NOAH: Oh bairns, it waxes clear about,  
That may ye see there where ye sit.

1 SON: Ay, lief father, look ye thereout, 185  
If that the water wane aught yet.

NOAH: That shall I do without doubt,  
Thereby the waning may we wit.  
Ah, Lord, to thee I lof and lout, 190  
The cataracts I trow be knit.  
Behold, my sons all three,  
The clouds are waxed clear.

2 SON: Ah, Lord of mercy free,  
Ay lofed might thou be.

NOAH: I shall assay the sea, 195  
How deep that it is here.

WIFE: Loved be that Lord that gives all grace,  
That kindly thus our care would keel.

NOAH: I shall cast lead and look the space, 200  
How deep the water is ilka deal.  
Fifteen cubits of height it has  
Over ilka hill fully to feal;

But be well comforted in this case,  
It is waning, this wot I well.  
Therefore a fowl of flight 205  
Full soon shall I forth send,  
To seek if he have sight,  
Some land upon to light;  
Then may we wit full right  
When our mourning shall mend. 210

Of all the fowls that men may find  
The raven is right, and wise is he.  
Thou art full crabbed and all thy kind,  
Wend forth thy course I command thee,  
And warily wit, and hither thee wind 215

183 *waxes* grows 185 *lief* dear 186 begins to subside yet 189 *lof* offer  
praises 190 I believe the flood-gates of heaven are shut 193 *free*  
gracious 194 *Ay lofed* Eternally praised 195-6 I shall sound the sea [to  
discover] how deep it is here 198 Who graciously relieves our troubles thus  
199 I shall put down a plumb and look for a while 200 *ilka deal* everywhere  
202 *feal* cover 208 Of some land to alight on 210 plight shall be amended  
212 *wight* bold 213 *crabbed* perverse 214 *Wend . . . course* Go your way  
215 Cautiously explore, and come back here

If thou find either land or tree.  
Nine months here have we been pined,  
But when God will, better must be.

1 DAUGHTER: That Lord that lends us life 220  
To lere his laws in land,  
He made both man and wife,  
He help to stint our strife.

3 DAUGHTER: Our cares are keen as knife,  
God grant us good tidand.

1 SON: Father, this fowl is forth full long; 225  
Upon some land I trow he lend,  
His food there for to find and fang—  
That makes him be a failing friend.

NOAH: Now son, and if he so forth gang, 230  
Since he for all our wealth gan wend,  
Then be he for his works wrong  
Evermore waried without end.  
And certes, for to see  
When our sorrow shall cease,  
Another fowl full free 235  
Our messenger shall be;  
Thou dove, I command thee  
Our comfort to increase.

A faithful fowl to send art thou 240  
Of all within these wones wide;  
Wend forth I pray thee, for our prow,  
And sadly seek on ilka side  
If the floods be falling now,  
That thou on the earth may bield and bide.  
Bring us some tokening that we may trow 245  
What tidings shall of us betide.

2 DAUGHTER: Good Lord, on us thou look,  
And cease our sorrow sere,

219 *lends* gives 220 To obey all his laws 222 May he help to bring our  
troubles to an end 223 *keen* sharp 224 *tidand* news 225 *forth* away  
226 *lend* stays 227 To find and partake of his food there 229 if he has gone  
away in this manner 230 Since he went for the good of all of us 232 *waried*  
accursed 238 To improve our circumstances 240 Above all within this  
whole place 241 *prow* good 242 *sadly* earnestly 244 So that you may  
remain and stay on the earth 245 *tokening* sign *trow* know 246 What  
will become of us 248 *sere* diverse



Since we all sin forsook  
And to thy lore us took. 250

3 DAUGHTER: A twelve-month but twelve week  
Have we been hovering here.

NOAH: Now bairns, we may be blithe and glad  
And lof our Lord of heavens king;  
My bird has done as I him bad, 255  
An olive branch I see him bring.

Blessed be thou fowl, that never was fade,  
That in thy force makes no failing;  
More joy in heart never ere I had,  
We mun be saved, now may we sing. 260

Come hither, my sons, in hie,  
Our woe away is went,  
I see here certainly  
The hills of Armenie. 265

1 SON: Lofed be that Lord forthy  
That us our lives has lent.

*Then Noah and his sons should sing.*

WIFE: From wrecks now we may win  
Out of this woe that we in were;  
But Noah, where are now all our kin  
And company we knew before? 270

NOAH: Dame, all are drowned, let be thy din,  
And soon they bought their sins sore.  
Good living let us begin,  
So that we grieve our God no more;  
He was grieved in degree 275  
And greatly moved in mind  
For sin, as men may see:  
*Dum dixit 'Penitet me'.*

250 And respected your teachings 252 hovering waiting 257 fade un-  
trustworthy 258 Who in your strength has no failing 261 in hie quickly  
264 Armenie Armenia 265-6 Therefore praised be that Lord who has granted  
us our lives 267-8 Now may we escape from vengeance and from the tribula-  
tions that we were in 271 be quiet 272 Straight away they paid severely  
for their sins 275 in degree duly 276 moved in mind troubled 278 'When  
he said, "I repent me"' (Genesis 6: 7 'for it repenteth me that I have made them').

Full sore forthinking was he  
That ever he made mankind. 280

That makes us now to toll and truss;  
But sons, he said—I wot well when—  
'Arcum ponam in nubibus',  
He set his bow clearly to ken  
As tokening between him and us, 285  
In knowledge to all Christian men  
That from this world were fined thus,  
With water would he never waste it then.  
Thus has God most of might  
Set his sign full clear 290  
Up in the air of height;  
The rainbow it is right,  
As men may see in sight  
In seasons of the year.

2 SON: Sir, now since God our sovereign sire  
Has set his sign thus in certain,  
Then may we wit this world's empire  
Shall evermore last, is not to lain. 295

NOAH: Nay son, that shall we not desire,  
For and we do we work in vain;  
For it shall once be wasted with fire,  
And never worth to world again. 300

WIFE: Ah, sir, our hearts are sore  
For these saws that ye say here,  
That mischief must be more. 305

NOAH: Be not afraid therefore,  
Ye shall not live then  
By many hundred year.

1 SON: Father, how shall this life be led  
Since none are in this world but we? 310

279 He was very deeply sorry 281 That makes us now heave and haul  
283 Genesis 9: 13 'I do set my bow in the clouds'. 284 ken make known  
287-8 That when this world were thus ended, he would never again destroy it with  
water 291 of height on high 297-8 Then may we know that this world's  
domain shall last for ever, and that should not be concealed 300 For if we do, we  
labour under a misapprehension 301 once one day 302 And never become  
the world again 304 saws words 306 therefore of that 307 You  
shall not live that long



NOAH: Sons, with your wives ye shall be stead,  
 And multiply your seed shall ye.  
 Your bairns shall ilk one other wed  
 And worship God in good degree;  
 Beasts and fowls shall forth be bred, 315  
 And so a world begin to be.  
 Now travail shall ye taste  
 To win you bread and wine,  
 For all this world is waste;  
 These beasts must be unbraced, 320  
 And wend we hence in haste,  
 In God's blessing and mine.

311 *stead* settled      312 *seed* offspring      313 *ilk one other* each one one of  
 the others'      317 Now you will know hard work      320 *unbraced* set free

## THE HOSIERS

### Moses and Pharaoh

The York *Moses and Pharaoh* dramatizes the main episodes in the epic narrative of Exodus 3–14, and includes several striking and ambitious scenes: God's appearance to Moses in the Burning Bush, the Ten Plagues which afflict the Egyptians, and the passage of the Israelites across the Red Sea, followed by the drowning of Pharaoh and his host who are in pursuit. The selection and treatment of some of the characters and incidents is unusual. The Pharaoh of the play is a conflation of two biblical Pharaohs, and the persecution of the infant Moses mentioned in lines 63–72 and 89–91 is an apocryphal element introduced by the dramatist in order to present Moses as a prefiguration of Christ in the *Slaughter of the Innocents* later in the cycle. At the centre of the play is a personal confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh; Aaron, who is prominent in the biblical version of the story, is absent. The scene therefore becomes notable for the way in which it looks forward to Christ's encounter with Satan in the *Harrowing of Hell*: Pharaoh and Satan share the same insolent tone and fondness for diabolical oaths, whilst Moses and Christ both have a calm and laconic confidence in the ability of divine power to overcome evil and release those in bondage.

Many of the play's unusual features derive from the dramatist's use of a contemporary source, the *Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament*, a long narrative poem written in the north of England around the turn of the fourteenth century. It is in the same metre as the Hosiers' play (abababab,cdcd), and embodies legendary material about Moses which the dramatist used for the play.

The cast is quite large (there are ten speaking parts), and the staging must undoubtedly have been more complex than that of most plays in cycle. Several 'scenes' are called for: Pharaoh's court, where much of the action occurs; Sinai, where God appears to Moses; Goshen, where the Jews languish in slavery; and the Red Sea. One doubts whether a pageant wagon alone would have been adequate for the presentation, and it seems likely that parts of the action took place in the street. Special effects have a prominent role. God's appearance in the Burning Bush may have involved elaborate costuming or, conceivably, fireworks. Moses' rod-serpent is still a familiar conjuring trick, employing a series of hollow cylindrical sections threaded on a cord. The Red Sea in which Pharaoh and his host were drowned may have consisted of lengths of cloth manipulated by supernumeraries.

The Hosiers' play is probably among the older ones in the cycle. A *Moses and Pharaoh* play attributed to the guild is mentioned as early as 1403. There is a sombre echo of the times in lines 345–8, where the dramatist substituted



## THE PEWTERERS AND FOUNDERS

### Joseph's Trouble about Mary

The substance of *Joseph's Trouble* derives not primarily from the Gospels but from the apocryphal writings associated with them, notably the narratives known as the *Protevangelium* and the Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew. The dramatist interpreted the legends he found there partly in terms of contemporary *mal marié* and anti-feminist literature, particularly secular adultery farces and fabliaux of the type celebrated by Chaucer in the *Miller's Tale*, where an elderly carpenter is cuckolded by his young wife. Although the comic potential of an apparently similar situation is at first exploited in the York play, the piece is nevertheless thematically linked on a doctrinal level with other episodes and characters in the cycle. Joseph's initial view of Mary looks back to aspects of the presentation of Eve and to Noah's wife, and the symbolic resonances of their disobedience, but much in the play turns on the irony that Mary is the second Eve through whose meek obedience the pattern of the Fall is to be reversed.

Joseph's serious function is that of the 'natural man', whose physical decay is an extension of his fallen condition, and with whom the audience can sympathize in his struggle to comprehend the divine mystery of the virgin birth. In his opening monologue and subsequent questioning of Mary and her maidens, he is presented by turns as pathetic, comic, and aggressive. None the less, however farcical his role becomes, the laughter is not allowed to touch Mary herself. She remains benign, aloof, and theologically exact, though this does not prevent a brief but very human reconciliation scene at the end of the play.

Apart from a few unclassifiable fragments of verse, there are two stanza-forms found in the play. Lines 79-166 are in the same eleven-line stanza as the *Fall of Man*, while most of the rest is in an equally complicated ten-line form (abab,ccbcb,) not found elsewhere in the cycle. Two locations for the action seem to be required: Mary's dwelling, which is likely to have occupied the pageant-wagon, and the wild place where Joseph wanders and encounters the angel. These parts of the action may have been presented in the street. The guilds who brought forth *Joseph's Trouble* had in common the fact that they were primarily makers of metal domestic utensils, such as kettles, pans, and pewter mugs and dishes.

JOSEPH: Of great mourning may I me mean,  
And walk full wearily by this way,

1 I may speak of great grief

For now then wend I best have been  
At ease and rest by reason ay.  
For I am of great eld,  
Weak and all unwield,  
As ilk man see it may;  
I may neither busk ne bield  
But either in frith or field;  
For shame what shall I say,

That thus-gates now on mine old days  
Have wedded a young wench to my wife,  
And may not well trine over two straws?  
Now Lord, how long shall I lead this life?  
My bones are heavy as lead  
And may not stand in stead,  
As kenned it is full rife.  
Now Lord, thou me wis and rede  
Or soon me drive to dead,  
Thou may best stint this strife.

For bitterly then may I ban  
The way I in the temple went,  
It was to me a bad bargain,  
For ruth I may it ay repent.  
For therein was ordained  
Unwedded men should stand,  
All sembled at assent,  
And ilkone a dry wand  
On height held in his hand,  
And I ne wist what it meant.

Among all others one bore I;  
It flourished fair, and flowers on spread,

3-4 For now it seems to me that the best [of my life] is past, and as was reasonable,  
always in ease and rest 5 eld age 6 unwield impotent, feeble 7 ilk  
each 8 busk move quickly bield remain 9 But either Except frith  
wood 11 thus-gates in this way on in 13 And can not step properly  
over two straws 16 in stead in [this] place 17 kenned known rife every-  
where 18 wis guide rede advise 19 me drive to dead impel me  
towards death 20 stint this strife bring an end to this trouble 21 ban  
curse 23 bargain undertaking 24 ruth sorrow ay for ever 27 All  
assembled at an appointed time and place 28-9 And each one held a dead  
stick on high in his hand 30 ne wist did not understand



And they said to me forthy  
That with a wife I should be wed.  
The bargain I made there,  
That rues me now full sore,  
So am I straitly stead.  
Now casts it me in care,  
For well I might evermore  
Anlepi life have led.

Her works me works my wangs to wet;  
I am beguiled—how, wot I not.  
My young wife is with child full great,  
That makes me now sorrow unsought.  
That reproof near has slain me,  
Forthy if any man frayne me  
How this thing might be wrought,  
To gab if I would pain me,  
The law stands hard again me:  
To death I mun be brought.

And loath methinketh, on the other side,  
My wife with any man to defame,  
And whether of these two that I bide  
I mun not scape without shame.  
The child certes is not mine;  
That reproof does me pine  
And gars me flee from home.  
My life if I should tine,  
She is a clean virgin  
For me, without blame.

But well I wot through prophecy  
A maiden clean should bear a child,  
But it is not she, sikerly.

33 forthy therefore	36 Now that is a great source of regret to me	37 straitly
stead sorely tried	40 Anlepi Solitary	41 Her activities cause me to wet
my cheeks	42 wot know	44 That now brings me unlooked-for sorrow
45 reproof disgrace	46 frayne enquire of	48 If I bothered to prevaricate
49 again against	50 mun must	51 And on the other hand, I am loath
53 And whichever of these two I endure	54 scape . . . shame avoid disgrace	
55 certes certainly	56 does me pine torments me	57 gars makes
I should lose my life (i.e. I stake my life on it)	60 For me As far as I am	58 If
concerned	63 sikerly truly	

Forthy I wot I am beguiled,  
And why ne would some young man take her?  
For certes I think over-go her  
Into some woods wild,  
Thus think I to steal from her.  
God shield these wild beasts slay her,  
She is so meek and mild.

Of my wending will I none warn,  
Nevertheless it is mine intent  
To ask her who got her that bairn,  
Yet would I wit fain ere I went.

All hail, God be herein.  
1 MAIDEN: Welcome, by God's dear might.  
JOSEPH: Where is that young virgin  
Mary, my bird so bright?

1 MAIDEN: Certes Joseph, ye shall understand  
That she is not full far you fro,  
She sits at her book full fast prayand  
For you and us, and for all tho  
That aught has need.  
But for to tell her will I go  
Of your coming, without dread.  
Have done and rise up, dame,  
And to me take good heed—  
Joseph, he is come home.  
MARY: Welcome, as God me speed.

Dreadless to me he is full dear;  
Joseph my spouse, welcome are ye.  
JOSEPH: Gramercy Mary, say what cheer,  
Tell me the sooth, how is't with thee?  
Who has been there?  
Thy womb is waxed great, think me,

65 ne would would not	66 Indeed I think I shall pass her by	69 God
forbid	71 wending departure	74 I should still like to know that before I
went	75 Greetings, God be with you here	80 That she is not very far
away from you	81 full fast prayand very earnestly praying	82 tho those
83 Who have any need	85 dread doubt	86 Stop what you are doing and
get up, lady	87 take good heed pay attention	90 Dreadless Undoubtedly
92 Thank you, Mary; tell me, how are you?	93 sooth truth	



Thou art with bairn, alas for care.  
Ah, maidens, woe worth you,  
That let her lere such lore.

2 MAIDEN: Joseph, ye shall not trow  
In her no feeble fare.

100

JOSEPH: Trow it not harm? Lief wench, do way!  
Her sides show she is with child.  
Whose is't Mary?

MARY: Sir, God's and yours.

JOSEPH: Nay, nay,

Now wot I well I am beguiled,  
And reason why?  
With me fleshly was thou never filed,  
And I forsake it here forthy.  
Say, maidens, how is this?  
Tell me the sooth, rede I;  
And but ye do, iwis,  
The bargain shall ye aby.

105

110

2 MAIDEN: If ye threat as fast as ye can,  
There is nought to say theretill,  
For truly here came never no man  
To wait the body with none ill  
Of this sweet wight,  
For we have dwelt ay with her still,  
And was never from her day nor night.  
Her keepers have we been  
And she ay in our sight,  
Come here no man between  
To touch that bird so bright.

115

120

1 MAIDEN: No, here came no man in these wones  
And that ever witness will we,

96 bairn child    care woe    97 shame on you    98 Who allowed her to  
learn such conduct    99-100 Joseph, you shall not believe such poor behaviour  
of her    101 Believe she is innocent? Dear girl, enough of this!    102 sides i.e.  
body    105 And for what reason?    106 You were never physically violated by me  
107 forsake reject    108 Tell me, maidens, how this came about?    110-11 Unless  
you do, indeed, you will pay the penalty for this state of affairs    112-13 However  
earnestly you threaten, there is nothing to say [of relevance] to this    115-16 To  
harm the body of this sweet creature with any evil deed    117 still all the time  
121 between in the meantime    123 these wones this place

Save an angel ilka day once,  
With bodily food her fed has he;  
Other came none.  
Wherefore we ne wot how it should be  
But through the Holy Ghost alone.  
For truly we trow this,  
His grace with her is gone,  
For she wrought never no miss,  
We witness everilkone.

125

130

JOSEPH: Then see I well your meaning is  
The angel has made her with child.  
Nay, some man in angel's likeness  
With somekin gaud has her beguiled,  
And that trow I.  
Forthy needs not such words wild  
At carp to me deceivingly  
We, why gab ye me so  
And feign swilk fantasy?  
Alas, me is full woe,  
For dole why ne might I die?

135

140

To me this is a careful case;  
Reckless I rave, reft is my rede.  
I dare look no man in the face,  
Derfly for dole why ne were I dead;  
Me loathes my life.  
In temple and in other stead  
Ilk man to hething will me drive.  
Was never wight so woe,  
For ruth I all to-rive;  
Alas, why wrought thou so  
Mary, my wedded wife?

145

150

155

125 ilka each    127 No one else came    131 His grace goes with her    132 For  
she never did anything amiss    133 everilkone each one [of us]    137 somekin  
some kind of    gaud deceitful trick    139 Therefore such wild suggestions are  
not necessary    140 At carp To tell    141 We Go on (conventional expression  
of derision)    gab lie to    142 swilk such    144 dole sorrow    145 careful case  
woeful circumstance    146 I rave to no avail, my wits are taken away    148 Derfly  
Wretchedly    149 Me loathes I hate    150 stead place    151 will hold  
me up for scorn    153 I am broken down completely by sorrow



MARY: To my witness great God I call,  
That in mind wrought never no miss.

JOSEPH: Whose is the child thou art withal?

MARY: Yours sir, and the king's of bliss.

JOSEPH: Yea, and how then?

Nay, selcouth tidings then is this,  
Excuse them well these women can.

But Mary, all that see thee  
May wit thy works are wan,  
Thy womb always it wrays thee  
That thou has met with man.

Whose is it, as fair mote thee befall?

MARY: Sir, it is yours and God's will.

JOSEPH: Nay, I ne have nought ado withal—

Name it no more to me, be still!

Thou wot as well as I,  
That we two sam fleshly  
Wrought never swilk works with ill.  
Look thou did no folly  
Before me privily  
Thy fair maidenhead to spill.

But who is the father? Tell me his name.

MARY: None but yourself.

JOSEPH: Let be, for shame.

I did it never; thou dotest dame, by books and bells!  
Full sackless should I bear this blame after thou tells,  
For I wrought never in word nor deed  
Thing that should mar thy maidenhead,  
To touch me till.

157 I who never thought to do anything wrong 158 *withal* therewith, with  
161 *selcouth tidings* amazing news 162 *them* themselves 164 Can per-  
ceive your behaviour is wicked 165 *wrays* betrays 166 *met* had inter-  
course 167 as you hope to prosper 169 No, I have nothing to do with it  
170 *Name* Mention 172-3 That we two together never did such evil things  
physically 174 *Look* Be sure 175 Behind my back, secretly 176 *spill*  
violate 179 you speak foolishly, woman, by book and bell (articles of exorcism)  
180 According to you, I must take the blame for this even though I am innocent  
182 *mar* spoil 183 As far as I was concerned

For of slike note were little need,  
Yet for mine own I would it feed,  
Might all be still;

Therefore the father tell me, Mary.

MARY: But God and you, I know right none.

JOSEPH: Ah, slike saws make me full sorry,  
With great mourning to make my moan.

Therefore be not so bold,  
That no slike tales be told,  
But hold thee still as stone.

Thou art young and I am old,  
Slike works if I do would,  
These games from me are gone.

Therefore, tell me in privy,  
Whose is the child thou art with now?  
Certes, there shall none wit but we,  
I dread the law as well as thou.

MARY: Now great God of his might

That all may dress and dight,  
Meekly to thee I bow.

Rue on this weary wight,  
That in his heart might light  
The sooth to ken and trow.

JOSEPH: Who had thy maidenhead Mary? Has thou aught  
mind?

MARY: Forsooth, I am a maiden clean.

JOSEPH: Nay, thou speaks now against kind,

Slike thing might never no man of mean.

A maiden to be with child?

These works from thee are wild,  
She is not born I ween.

184-6 There is no need for such difficulty as this, for I would bring it [the child] up  
as my own, for the sake of peace 188 *But* Except *right none* none at all  
189 *slike saws* such words 193 *hold thee still* keep quiet 195-6 Even if I  
were inclined, I am past doing such things 197 *privy* confidence 199 *none*  
*wit* no one know 202 *dress* ordain *dight* accomplish 204 *Rue* Have  
pity 205 *light* alight 207 *ought mind* any recollection 209 *kind*  
nature 210 Such a thing no man could ever assert 212 What you say is  
mad 213 *ween* believe



MARY: Joseph, ye are beguiled,  
 With sin was I never filed,  
 God's sand is on me seen. 215

JOSEPH: God's sand? Yah, Mary, God help!  
 But certes that child was never ours two.  
 But woman-kind if them list help,  
 Yet would they no man wist her woe. 220  
 MARY: Certes it is God's sand

That shall I never go fro  
 JOSEPH: Yah, Mary, draw thine onde,  
 For further yet will I fond,  
 I trow not it be so. 225

The sooth from me if that thou lain,  
 The child-bearing may thou not hide;  
 But sit still here till I come again,  
 Me bus an errand here beside.  
 MARY: Now great God he you wis, 230  
 And mend you of your miss  
 Of me, what so betide.  
 As he is king of bliss,  
 Send you some sand of this,  
 In truth that ye might bide. 235

JOSEPH: Now Lord God that all thing may  
 At thine own will both do and dress,  
 Wis me now some ready way  
 To walk here in this wilderness.  
 But ere I pass this hill, 240  
 Do with me what God will,  
 Either more or less,  
 Here bus me bide full still  
 Till I have slept my fill,  
 My heart so heavy it is. 245

215 filed besmirched 216 God's dispensation in me is seen 219-20 But  
 if women want help, they would still have no man understand their problem.  
 221+ Line missing in MS 222 I shall never deny that 223 draw your breath  
 (i.e. be quiet) 224 fond enquire 226 lain conceal 229 I have to attend  
 to an errand near by 231 And amend your misapprehension 232 whatever  
 happens 234 [May he] send you some proof of this 238 Inform me now  
 of some easy way 240 ere before 243 Here I must rest

ANGEL: Waken, Joseph, and take better keep  
 To Mary, that is thy fellow fast.  
 JOSEPH: Ah, I am full weary, lief, let me sleep,  
 Forwandered and walked in this forest.  
 ANGEL: Rise up, and sleep no more, 250  
 Thou makest her heart full sore  
 That loves thee alther best.  
 JOSEPH: We, now is this a ferly fare  
 For to be caught both here and there,  
 And nowhere may have rest. 255

Say, what art thou? Tell me this thing.  
 ANGEL: I, Gabriel, God's angel full even  
 That has taken Mary to my keeping,  
 And sent is thee to say with steven  
 In leal wedlock thou lead thee. 260  
 Leave her not, I forbid thee,  
 Ne sin of her thou neven,  
 But to her fast thou speed thee  
 And of her nought thou dread thee,  
 It is God's sand of heaven. 265

The child that shall be born of her,  
 It is conceived of the Holy Ghost.  
 All joy and bliss then shall be after,  
 And to all mankind now alther most.  
 Jesus his name thou call, 270  
 For slike hap shall him fall  
 As thou shall see in haste.  
 His people save he shall  
 Of evils and angrice all,  
 That they are now embraced. 275

JOSEPH: And is this sooth, angel, thou says?

ANGEL: Yea, and this to token right:

246 pay more attention 247 who is your faithful mate 248 lief sir  
 249 Forwandered Weary with wandering walked exhausted with walking 252 alther  
 best best of all 253 Well, now this is an extraordinary thing 254 caught  
 pursued 257 full even truth to tell 258 keeping care 259-60 I am  
 sent to bring you a command to keep yourself in loyal wedlock 262 neven mention  
 264 And doubt her no longer 265 sand of message from 269 alther most  
 most of all 271 hap fortune fall befall 272 in haste soon 274 O From  
angrice tribulations 275 In which they are now entangled 277 Yes, and  
 take this as a true sign



Wend forth to Mary thy wife always,  
Bring her to Bethlehem this ilk night.  
There shall a child born be, 280  
God's son of heaven is he  
And man ay most of might.

JOSEPH: Now, Lord God, full well is me  
That ever that I this sight should see,  
I was never ere so light. 285

→ For for I would have her thus refused,  
And sackless blame that ay was clear;  
Me bus pray her hold me excused,  
As some men does with full good cheer.  
Say Mary, wife, how fares thou? 290

MARY: The better, sir, for you.  
Why stand ye there? Come near.

JOSEPH: My back fain would I bow  
And ask forgiveness now,  
Wist I thou would me hear. 295

MARY: Forgiveness sir? Let be, for shame,  
→ Slike words should all good women lack. . . .

JOSEPH: Yea, Mary, I am to blame  
For words long-ere I to thee spake. }  
But gather sam now all our gear, }  
Slike poor weed as we wear, }  
And prick them in a pack. }  
To Bethlehem bus me it bear, }  
→ For little thing will women dere; }  
Help up now on my back. } 300

278 *wife always* faithful wife    279 *ilk* very    283 I am very glad    285 *light*  
light-hearted    286-8 For I would have thus condemned her, and blamed the  
innocent who was always pure. I must beg her to forgive me    291 *for* you for  
seeing you    293 *fain* gladly    295 If I thought you would be prepared to  
hear me out    297 *lack* do without    299 *long-ere* some time ago    300-5 But  
now gather together all our possessions, such poor clothes as we wear, and fasten them  
in a pack. To Bethlehem I must carry it, for women are vexed by little things. Help me  
up with it.

## THE TILETHATCHERS

### *The Nativity*

The moment of the Incarnation, of God becoming man, was of central importance in the mystery cycles because it marked the beginning of the movement towards redemption by means of Christ's atonement for the sin of Adam. The version of the event in the York cycle is conspicuous for a tranquil beauty and lyrical simplicity of the kind often found in the most moving medieval paintings of the Nativity. Though it is one of the shortest plays in the cycle, requiring only a cast of two and a simple set—Joseph and Mary, the ruined stable—it nevertheless reveals on closer examination and in performance a number of subtle poetic and dramatic effects. The difficult episode of the birth itself is managed on stage by means of the Virgin kneeling in prayer to God (lines 48-9), then rising and parting her cloak to reveal the child before her—a surprising and enchanting moment for the audience, but also an important one thematically, as the birth is seen to be serene and painless, unlike all others since the Fall. For this and several other features the dramatist was indebted to an influential meditative account of the Nativity, the Revelations of St Bridget (c.1400), as J. W. Robinson has shown in an illuminating commentary on the play. (X)

The simplicity of the seven-line stanza, abab<sub>2</sub>c<sub>2</sub>b<sub>2</sub>c<sub>2</sub>, conceals a variety of effects. For example, though the aged Joseph's touching speech at the beginning is primarily motivated by his solicitude for Mary (and likewise his subsequent ironical errand for a candle and firewood), it enables the dramatist to initiate motifs and images which run throughout the play. Jesus brings light, warmth, and the promise of redemption to the dark, cold, and ruined postlapsarian world into which he is born. Some of the imagery recalls the chiaroscuro effects first evoked in the *Fall of the Angels*, and adumbrates those to come in the *Harrowing of Hell*. Links with other plays in the cycle are the formal 'Hail' lyrics delivered by Joseph and Mary over the child, which anticipate those at the end of the *Entry into Jerusalem* and in *Herod* and *The Magi*; they are later repeated in malevolent parody by the torturers in the play of Christ's second appearance before Pilate.

In line 18 the dramatist probably intended to draw the attention of the audience to the craft of the Tilehatchers, who roofed buildings, and who would presumably have attended to this feature of their pageant-wagon. The broken roof may later have had a function in the play, letting the light of the star shine in to mingle with that radiating from the child (lines 92-8), as is the case in some early paintings of the scene.