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THE DOOMSDAY PAGEANT OF THE YORK MERCERS, 1433

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During 1971 the firm of Grays Solicitors, Duncombe Place, York, sent to various depositories of manuscripts in that city documents which had been in their possession for many years. Among these documents was an indenture made between the master and the constables of the Mercers of the city of York and their pageant masters for the year 1433. The document is now in the possession of the Company of Merchant Adventurers of York, the successor to the medieval guild of Mercers. It is one half of the indenture, written on parchment, and it measures approximately \(8\frac{9}{10}\) inches by \(12\frac{9}{10}\) inches. The irregular cut at the top intersects a word which seems to be seven letters long. An endorsement is written in an entirely different hand but bears the same date. In the transcription that follows, the form of the document has been reproduced as accurately as possible, abbreviations have been expanded silently and line terminations have been indicated by an acute stroke.

This indenture made in \(\text{pe feste of Corpus Cristi}
\text{In pe 3ere of oure lorde}
\text{god m\textsuperscript{1} cccc xxxiiij betwene Richard Louth maister of pe Cumpny / of}
\text{Mersers of pe Cite of \textit{Sorke} Nicholas Vsflete and William, 3arom Custables}
\text{of pe saide Cumpny on pe to syde}\textsuperscript{2}
\text{And William Bedale William / Holbek}
\text{Henry Market and Thomas Curtays \textit{pan} Pagent Maisters on pe tother}
\text{syde beris witnes bat pe saide Maister and Constables has deliuerde / to}
\text{pe saide Pagent Maisters all \textit{bir} parcelles vnrewretyn langoing to \textit{paire}}
\text{pagent safely to kepe and to gouerne for \textit{paire tyme} And thos same /}
\text{parcelles to deliuer forthe agayne in resonable tyme to \textit{pe nexte Pagent}}
\text{Maisters bat sall occupy in \textit{pe nexste 3ere after And so all Pa / gent}}
\text{Maisters to deliuer forth be \textit{pis} endenture to other Pagent Maisters bat}
\text{ sall occupy for \textit{pe 3ere while \textit{pe} Pagent gere lastes First a / Pagent with}
\text{iiij wheles helle mouthe iij garmentes for iij deuels vj deuelles faces in iij}
\text{Vesernes Array for iij euell saules \textit{bat / ys to say iij Sirkes iij paire hoses ij}}
\text{vesenes and iij Chauelers Array for iij gode saules \textit{bat ys to say iij Sirkes iij}}
\text{paire hoses ij vesernes and iij che / uelers iij paire Aungell wynges with}
\text{Iren in \textit{pe} endes iij trimpues of white plate and iij redes iij Aubes for iiij}
\text{Appostels diademes with / iij vesernes for iiij Appostels iiiij diademes with}
\text{iiij Cheuelers of \textit{salow for iiij Apostels A cloud and iij peces of Rainbow}}
\text{of tymber Array / for god \textit{bat} ys to say a Sirke wounded a diademewith a}
\text{veserne gilted A grete coster of rede damaske payntid for the bakke syde of}
\text{\textit{pe} / pagent iij other lesse costers for iij sydes of \textit{pe} Pagent iij other costers}
\text{of lewent\textsuperscript{3} brede for \textit{pe} sides of \textit{pe} Pagent A litel coster iiiij squared / to}
\text{hang at \textit{pe} bakke of god iiiij Irens to bere vpppe heuen iiiij finale coterelles}
\text{and a Iren pynne A brandreth of Iren \textit{bat} god sall sitte vpppon / when he}
\text{shall fly vpppe to heuen with iiiij rapes at iiiij corners A heuen of Iren with a}
naffe of tre ij peces of rede cloudes and sternes of gold / langing to heuen
ij peces of blu cloudes payntid on bothe sydes ij peces of rede cloudes
with sunne bemes of golde and sternes for pe / hiest of heuen with a lang
small border of pe same wurke vij grete Aungels halding pe passion of
god Ane of þame has a fane / of laton and a crosse of Iren in his hede
giltid iiiij smaler Aungels gilded holding þe passion ix smaler Aungels
payntid rede to / renne aboute in þe heuen A lang small corde to gerre
þe Aungels renne aboute ij shorte rolles of tre to putte forthe þe pagent

[Endorsement]

Item j Baner of rede bukeram bett / with golde with þe Trinite and
with ostret / feders and with j lange stremer / Item iiiij smale baners
with Trinite in þam and roset / 1433 /

Since this indenture has come to light only very recently, it is impossible
here to make a detailed study of its significance in the history of staging, the
history of the York Cycle, or even the history of the Mercers' pageant. However, a few tentative observations can be made.

1. The Indenture

This must be considered a definitive inventory of the properties of the
pageant. It is a binding legal document. If a dispute had arisen over the
integrity of the pageant masters in their care of the properties, both halves
of the indenture would have been produced and the irregular cut at the top
of this half of the document would have had to correspond exactly to the
cut at the top of the other half so that the intersected word (see above) was
clearly legible. That the Mercers bothered to draw up an internal legal
document, dated and indented, indicates both the importance of the pageant
to the guild and the value of the properties. This indenture was intended to
be passed from one elected group of pageant masters to the next "while þe
Pagent gere lastes." Indeed, there is a reference to it in a later document
of the guild.

2. The Stage Properties

From the details given of the mechanical properties of the pageant, it
would appear that the pageant was taken down at the end of each perform­
ance and reassembled the next year. The careful statement "a Pagent with
iiij wheles," taken together with the final statement "ij shorte rolles of tre to
putte forthe þe pagent," indicates that the four wheels constituted a chassis
upon which the pageant itself was set for the production, and that it was
stored without the wheels and rolled in and out of the pageant house on the
rollers. We are given full details of the superstructure. It represented heaven
and was made of iron and wood ("A heuen of Iren with a naffe of tre"),
supported by four iron poles ("iiij Irens to bere vppe heuen"). These were
probably fitted into sockets at the four corners of the wagon and bolted to
"heuen" with "iiij finale coterelles." The structure, once set up, must have
been fairly solid since it had to bear the weight of the actor playing Deus,
as he is called in the dramatis personae of the text, sitting on an iron grill-work
swing ("A brandreth of Iren þat god sail sitte vppon . . . with iiij rapes at
iiij corners") as he ascended to heaven ("when he sail fly vppe to heuen"). The single "Iren pynne" specified in the properties may have been similar
to a ring-bolt through which the ropes to manipulate the swing were passed
to stage-hands concealed behind the “grete coster of rede damaske payntid
for the bakke syde of þe pagent.” This curtain and the others are itemized
separately, again indicating that the pageant came apart. The pageant was
enclosed on three sides with the great curtain and two smaller ones “for
ij sydes of þe Pagent.” Three other curtains which measured “lewent brede”
were also provided for “þe sides of þe Pagent.” These may have been pageant
cloths to conceal the wheels. Another curtain is mentioned as a backdrop for
Deus (“A litel coster iiiij squared to hang at þe bakke of god”). This was
probably the backrest of the swing seat which appears, from the text, to have
been used as the Judgment seat.

The pageant appears to have included a representation of heaven and
“þe hiest of heuen.” It is likely that the first two pieces of scenery mentioned,
“A cloud and ij peces of Rainbow of tymber,” either rested on the floor of
the pageant or were fixed against the back curtain. The superstructure, in
all probability, was semi-arched or sloped towards the rear of the cart.
Heaven, with its stars and red and blue clouds (the latter probably suspended
since it is specified that they were “payntid on bothe sydes”) seems to have given
way towards the front of the wagon to “hiest of heuen” with its red clouds,
golden sunbeams and stars. The upper or front edge of the superstructure
seems to have been hung with a “lang small border of þe same wurke”, that
is a border painted with stars and sunbeams. The nine smaller red puppet
angels running about on their string (manipulated, like the swing, from behind
the back curtain) were probably suspended over the wagon under “heuen.”
The swing seat itself was probably towards the rear of the wagon, making
it as easy as possible for the stage-hands to pull Deus up to heaven.

Hell mouth is listed as a separate property. This argues that it was not
part of the pageant itself but set in front of it on the street. It is specified that
the swing was used by Deus only “when he sail fy vppe to heuen.” Therefore,
when Deus says,

... till erpe nowe will I wende,
Mi-selue to sitte in mageste.
To deme my domes I woll descende, (Yorks, XLVII, 179–81)

it is likely that he came down from the wagon to the street level. After greeting
his apostles (Yorks XLVIII, 185–216) he may have returned with them to
the wagon to take his place on the swing seat. He says to the apostles, “Comes
fourthe, I schall sitte ȝou betwene” (Yorks XLVIII, 215) and there follows the
stage direction “Hic ad sedem iudicij (Yorks XLVIII between lines 216 and
217). Once the judgment was passed, the good souls could have mounted the
wagon, clearly making the distinction between the saved and the damned
left on the street to be dragged into hell mouth.

3. The Costumes

There are costumes provided for at least twenty-one actors. Masks (“vesernes”) are specified for the devils (these were especially elaborate, bearing two faces each), the good and bad souls, Deus, and three of the eleven apostles. Wigs (“cheuelers”) are listed for the good and bad angels and it is specified that four of the apostles wore blonde ones. Four other apostles wore diadems and a special gilded one is listed for Deus. The devils and the good
and bad souls all wore hose and "sirkes" or simple tunics, while four of the apostles wore albs. The garment specified for Deus, "a Sirke wounded," must have been a tunic bearing the marks of the Passion. Before he descends for the judgment, he refers to it:

Dis body will I bere with me,
Howe it was dight, mannes mys to mende,
All mankynde bere schall it see. (York XLVIII, 182-84)

Again, in the sermon before the judgment he displays the wounds:

Here may 3e see my woundes wide,
De whilke I tholed for youre mysdede,
Thurgh harte and heed, foote, hand, and hide,
Nought for my gilte, butt for youre nede.
Beholdis both body, bak, and side,
How dere I bought youre brotherhede.
Des bittir peynes I wolde abide
To bye you blisse, þus wolde I bleede. (York XLVIII, 245-52)

4. The Number of Characters

The information about the dramatis personae offered by the document corresponds more closely to the text than to the Ordo paginarum written by Roger Burton in 1415. The Ordo names Jesus first, then Mary, who appears neither in the document nor in the text, and then twelve apostles. Eleven apostles are provided with costumes in the document; the text gives only two apostles but in doing so probably limits itself to the speaking parts. The Ordo specifies four good spirits and four bad ones; the document and the text each provide for only two. Finally, the Ordo lists six devils, while the document and the text have only three. However, there are interesting vestigial remains of the six, since each of the documentary devils wears a two-faced mask.

5. The Angels

The angels provide the greatest single problem in the document. Altogether twenty are mentioned. Nine of these are the red puppets suspended from heaven. The other eleven fall into two distinct categories, "vij grete Aungels halding þe passion of god Ane of þame has a fane of laton and a crosse of Iren in his hede giltid" and "iiij smaler Aungels giltid holding þe passion." Further, there is mention of only "ij paire Aungell wynges with Iren in þe endes." To complicate the situation, there are three speaking parts for angels in the text, while the Ordo lists four angels with horns and four with a crown [of thorns], a lance and two scourges.

The confusion can be lessened somewhat by separating out the four smaller gilt angels holding the passion. These were, in all probability, either painted on the backdrop (the curtain is specified as "rede damaske payntid") or free-standing. Unless these angels were children painted in gilt paint, which seems improbable, it is likely that they were a pictorial representation.

But the seven great angels remain a problem. In some way they, too, represented the passion. As we have seen, the Ordo provides for four of them to be carrying three symbols of the passion. In the text, Deus refers specifically and directly to these symbols:
Mi body was scourged with-outen skill,  
As theffe full thraly was [I] thrette,  
On crosse þei hanged me, on a hill,  
Bloody and bloo, as I was bette.  
With croune of thorne throsten full ill,  
Þis spere vnto my side was sette,  
Myne harte bloode spared noght þei for to spill,  
Manne for thy loue wolde I not lette. (York XLVIII, 253-60)

The use of the adjective “þis” in line 258 indicates that as he spoke Deus gestured towards an angel bearing that symbol. A fourth symbol referred to in the speech, the cross, is provided for in this document by the angel bearing the fane who has “a crosse of Iren in his hede gilitid.” The Ordo also specifies four angels with four horns; the musical instruments are in this document specified as “ij trumpes of white plate and ij redes.” Further, there are stage directions calling for two songs from an angelic choir. The first comes as Deus mounts the Judgment seat “cum cantu angelorum” (York XLVIII between lines 216 and 217), and the second at the conclusion as he flies to heaven “Et sic facit finem cum melodia angelorum transiens a loco ad locum” (York XLVIII after line 380). There remains, also, the separate listing of “ij paire Aungell wynges with Iren in þe endes.”

In 1415 when Burton drew up the Ordo it seems that there were eight angels who were actors. The obvious assumption to make, then, is that these seven “grete Aungels” were actors. But this is borne out neither by the text nor by the document. The role of the angels in the text is to blow the trumpets signifying the end of the world as Deus specifically instructs them (York XLVIII, 63-5) to act as his messengers summoning the souls to judgment (York XLVIII, 81-96), and to part the good souls from the bad (York XLVIII, 168-76). Since there are only two good souls and two bad, as many as seven angels seems excessive. The description given in the document of the great angels also argues against the idea that they were actors. They appear in the list long after the list of costumes for the actors and together with the other angels that are clearly artificial. Further, the detailed description of one of them is more like that of an object than of properties for an actor: “Ane of þame has a fane of laton and a crosse of Iren in his hede.” The use of the preposition “in” argues for something fixed, not something that is to be worn like the masks, wigs and diadems specified earlier. The fane also seems a fixed part of an object. Further, these items are not preceded by the formula “array for” that is used for all the other costumes. It is likely, therefore, that these seven angels, like the other thirteen, were artificial and somehow part of the properties of the wagon. The two pairs of angels’ wings that do appear in the costume list, then, were for two actors playing angels. The discrepancy between the two given here and the three provided in the text is not a serious one. Indeed, it is possible that there never were three angels. Two angels speak together as they summon the dead (York XLVIII, 81-96); but the speech given to the third angel (York XLVIII, 168-76), separating the good souls from the bad, is an isolated one and could easily have been spoken by either the first or second angel. Exactly where the seven great angels were placed and what their relationship was to the four smaller ones remains a problem, but it seems clear that they were part of the complex properties of the wagon.
6. The Endorsement
The five red and gold banners that are listed in the endorsement should not be considered as an integral part of the pageant properties. The Mercers' Guild was not strictly speaking a craft guild but rather an association of traders. There were two distinct sides of the guild activities, the side concerned with trade which was the Mercers' Guild itself and the Confraternity of the Holy Trinity which embraced the membership of the guild and their wives, daughters or sisters. The banners are those of the Confraternity. They bear the sign of the Trinity, probably a version of the familiar device of the figure of God the Father holding the crucified Christ with the dove of the Holy Spirit hovering above them. These banners undoubtedly accompanied the pageant but they were also used in the formal Corpus Christi procession the next day and on any other occasion of celebration or display in which the Confraternity of the Holy Trinity and the Mercers' Guild took part.

From this document, the colourful lavishness of the Doomsday pageant comes alive. From it we can surmise much about the forty-seven other pageant wagons in the York Cycle. But it must be remembered that Doomsday was the finale of the entire day's playmaking and that the Mercers were a wealthy and powerful guild. What we have here is one of the most elaborate pageants in the cycle. Yet, from its ingenuity and the multiplicity of the properties, we can be confident that, though perhaps to modern taste over elaborate and garish, the York pageants were neither simple nor crude.

NOTES
1 We wish to thank the Governor and Court of the Company of Merchant Adventurers for permission to publish the document, and Mr Bernard Johnson, archivist to the Company, for his kindness in allowing us access to it. We also wish to acknowledge the assistance of Mr C. B. L. Barr and Miss Katherine Longley of York Minister Library.
2 For "on ye to syde" see OED s.v. To, adj.
3 "Lewent" here does not mean "of the Levant" but "eleventh," a term of measurement.
6 Smith, York Plays, p. xxvii.
7 Ibid., "iiij or angeli cum tubis, et iiiij or cum corona, lancea, et iij flagellis."