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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.¹ 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 endenture made in þe feste of Corpus Cristi In þe 3ere of oure lorde god m¹ cccc xxxiiij betwene Richard Louth maister of þe Cumpany / of Mersers of þe Cite of 3orke Nicholas Vsflere and William 3arom Custables of þe saide Cumpany on þe to syde² And William Bedale William / Holbek Henry Market and Thomas Curtays þan Pagent Maisters on þe tother syde beris witnes þat þe saide Maister and Constables has deliuerde / to þe saide Pagent Maisters all þir parcelles vndrewretyn langing to þaire pagent safely to kepe and to gouerne for þaire tyme And thos same / parcelles to deliuer forthe agayne in resonable tyme to þe nexte Pagent Maisters þat sall occupy in þe nexste 3ere after And so all Pa / gent Maisters to deliuer forth þe þis endenture to other Pagent Maisters þat sall occupy for þe 3ere while þe Pagent gere lastes First a / Pagent with iiij wheles helle mouthe iij garmentes for iij deuels vj deuelles faces in iij Vesernes Array for ij euell saules þat / ys to say ij Sirkes ij paire hoses ij vesenes and ij Chaulers Array for ij gode saules þat ys to say ij Sirkes ij paire hoses ij vesernes and ij che / uelers ij paire Aungell wynges with Iren in þe endes ij trumpes of white plate and ij redes iiij Aubes for iiij Appostels iij diademes with / iij vesernes for iij Appostels iiij diademes with iiij Cheuelers of 3alow for iiij Apostels A cloud and ij peces of Rainbow of tymber Array / for god þat ys to say a Sirke wounded a diademe with a veserne gilted A grete coster of rede damaske payntid for the bakke syde of þe / pagent ij other lesse costers for ij sydes of þe Pagent iij other costers of lewent³ brede for þe sides of þe Pagent A litel coster iiij squared / to hang at þe bakke of god iiij Irens to bere vppe heuen iiij finale coterelles and a Iren pynne A brandreth of Iren þat god sall sitte vppon / when he sall fly vppe to heuen with iiij rapes at iiij 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 iij peces of rede cloudes
 with sunne bemes of golde and sternes for þe / hiest of heuen with a lang
 small border of þe same wurke 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 iiii smaler Aungels gilted 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 pageant

[Endorsement]

Item j Baner of rede bukeram bett / with golde with þe Trinite and
 with ostret / feders and with j lange stremer / Item iiii 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 Pageant gere lastes." Indeed, there is a reference to it in a later document of the guild.⁴

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 performance and reassembled the next year. The careful statement "a Pageant with iiii wheles," taken together with the final statement "ij shorte rolles of tre to putte forthe þe pageant," 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 ("iij Irens to bere vppe heuen"). These were probably fitted into sockets at the four corners of the wagon and bolted to "heuen" with "iij 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,⁵ sitting on an iron grill-work swing ("A brandreth of Iren þat god sall sitte vppon . . . with iij rapes at iij corners") as he ascended to heaven ("when he sall 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 pageant." 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 Pageant." Three other curtains which measured "lewent brede" were also provided for "þe sides of þe Pageant." These may have been pageant cloths to conceal the wheels.⁶ 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 sall fly vppe to heuen." Therefore, when Deus says,

... till erþe nowe will I wende,

Mi-selue to sitte in mageste.

To deme my domes I woll descende, (*York*, XLVIII, 179-81)

it is likely that he came down from the wagon to the street level. After greeting his apostles (*York* 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 3ou betwene" (*York* XLVIII, 215) and there follows the stage direction "Hic ad sedem iudicij" (*York* 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:

Pis body will I bere with me,
Howe it was dight, mannes mys to mende,
All mankynde þere 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,
Þe 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 1415.⁷ 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.⁸

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,
 Blody and bloo, as I was bette.
 With croune of thorne throsten full ill,
 Dis spere vnto my side was sette,
 Myne harte bloode spared nocht 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 giltid." 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 þe to syde" see *OED* s.v. *To*, *adj.*
- ³ "Lewent" here does not mean "of the Levant" but "eleventh," a term of measurement.
- ⁴ Maud Sellers, ed., *The York Mercers and Merchant Adventurers 1356-1917*, Surtees Soc., CXXIX (1917), p. 82.
- ⁵ Lucy Toulmin Smith, ed., *York Plays* (Oxford, 1885), pp. 497-513. All subsequent quotations from the text are taken from this edition.
- ⁶ G. Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660*, I (London, 1959), p. 173, Fig. 13.
- ⁷ Smith, *York Plays*, p. xxvii.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, "iiij^{or} angeli cum tubis, et iiij^{or} cum corona, lancea, et ij flagellis."