

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Martin Stevens, 'Postscript', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 6 (1972), 113-15

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=123850&silos_library=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

POSTSCRIPT

By MARTIN STEVENS

In her interpretation of the York dramatic records, Miss Dorrell has, essentially, restated the orthodox position. She believes that the York plays were performed processionally through the streets of the city, at first on the same day as the religious procession and later on a separate day. In her view the religious and dramatic processions were always distinct events. While I do not wish to quarrel with the conjecture that the plays as preserved in the register could have been performed at a breakneck pace in the course of one crowded, twenty-hour day (she posits a performance time from 4.30 a.m. of one day to 12.52 a.m. the next), good sense dictates against the likelihood that such a performance ever took place. Moreover, Miss Dorrell conveniently bases her calculations on a performance route of twelve stations. How much longer would have been needed in years when there were sixteen or perhaps even seventeen stations? This expanded route would surely have occasioned a performance extending very nearly around the clock.

While it would be pointless to attempt a systematic rebuttal of her argument, I would wish to raise two basic objections to Miss Dorrell's interpretation of the York civic records. First, if she is right that prior to 1426 there were separate religious and dramatic processions in York on Corpus Christi Day, what time would she allot for the religious procession? Does she mean to suggest that the religious procession took place in competition with the dramatic? Since the play by her calculations took the entire day, when, indeed, would there have been time for a religious procession at all unless the two did occur simultaneously? The explanation offered simply does not account for the religious procession, and yet the records are unequivocal on the point that it did take place on Corpus Christi Day up to and for some time after 1426. Perhaps Miss Dorrell means to suggest that prior to 1426 the play at York was shorter and fundamentally different from what it became in later times, so that it could have been performed after the religious procession was over. She seems to think that the procession preceded the play, or so she would surmise from the record for 1419 describing the attack by the Carpenters and the Cordwainers on the Skinners. In any event we are left with no more specific a notion of how the York play developed and no clearer a picture of the sequence of events which occurred on Corpus Christi Day than we ever had.¹

The second major objection that I have to Miss Dorrell's account of the

York play is her failure to recognize the underlying as well as the direct relationship between religious and dramatic procession. Every historian of the drama knows that the Corpus Christi play grew out of the religious procession. For example, Rosemary Woolf in her recent book on *The English Mystery Plays* observes that "it can only have been the style of the Corpus Christi procession itself that can account for the unusual system of moving pageant-carts" which characterized the great Northern cycles.² And yet, nowhere does Miss Dorrell acknowledge this all-important phase in the growth of the York cycle. If it was not in 1426, as I have tried to show, that the York dramatic and religious processions split apart, when would that signal event have taken place? Is it likely that the York records, which take us well back into the fourteenth century, would have been mute about so important an organizational change in the festival?

But, of course, they are not mute on this point. We need only discard the old preconception that the Corpus Christi play as we know it began in the last quarter of the fourteenth century and postpone its birth some fifty to seventy-five years to understand the full significance of the entry for 1426, when Friar William Melton proposed the separation of procession and play. We are told explicitly here that, in accordance with established custom, the "artifices ciuitatis Eborum suis sumptibus annis singulis ludi fecerunt quemdam ludum sumptuosum in diuersis paginis compilatum Veteris et Noui Testamenti representationum per diuersa loca predictae ciuitatis in festo Corporis Cristi quamdam processionem solempnem *ad tunc similiter* facientes ob reuerenciam sacramenti Corporis Cristi" (*A/Y Memorandum Book*, f.278, italics added. ". . . crafts of the city of York, at their own expense, present plays every year and especially a certain lavish play consisting of various pageants compiled from the Old and New Testaments in various places of the said city during the Feast of Corpus Christi while *at the same time* they make a solemn procession in reverence of the sacrament of Corpus Christi"). Miss Dorrell, for reasons unclear to me, wishes to interpret "*ad tunc similiter*" as meaning "on the feast day," when all the evidence from York and elsewhere indicates that the phrase meant literally what it says. Indeed, the association of pageant and religious procession was everywhere in evidence; in Dublin, for example, a list similar to that of Roger Burton is headed "The Pagentys of Corpus Christi Processioun."³ When one adds to this straightforward account of the composite religious-dramatic procession the fact that the Burton *ordo paginarum* as well as the second list of some years later is followed by a list of torches and a processional in the same hand, there can be little room for doubt that in the formative stage of the York cycle of plays, dramatic pageants were part of the solemn religious procession of Corpus Christi.⁴

Miss Dorrell has done a valuable service in providing what has thus far been lacking—as complete an account of the York performance as the traditional interpretation of the records will permit. However, one glance at her Table (Performance in Procession) should convince even the faithful that the performance of the York cycle as conventionally described is a logistician's nightmare.

NOTES

- ¹ Miss Dorrell is careful to place her reconstruction of the York performance in the period after 1427. Yet she draws on records from the earlier period. Can she be sure, for example, that the assembly time of 4.30 a.m., specified in the Proclamation of 1415, would still have applied when procession and play took place on different days?
- ² *The English Mystery Plays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 73.
- ³ See E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, II, 364.
- ⁴ Two observations of Miss Dorrell are in need of some clarification. (1) She rightly notes that the torch list is separated from Burton's list of pageants proper by a space. She would take this space as a possible indication that the two were in fact separate documents. But what she does not take into consideration is that Burton's list is introduced by a heading which in turn is separated from the list by a space. It would then seem logical that the spaces are used to mark off entries under the same heading, the dramatic list coming first, and the list of torches and processional second. (2) It is true that points along the way singled out for the routes of the religious and dramatic processions are different. But that is not to say that the routes themselves are different, as Miss Dorrell argues. The religious procession, after all, would be defined by the journey of the Host—in this instance, from Holy Trinity to the Minster, where the consecration took place, and to St Leonard's Hospital to afford a special ceremony for the sick. This route in no way conflicts with that specified for the dramatic procession, which would be defined by the places designated for stops. More than likely the full dramatic and religious procession proceeded along Micklegate, over Ouse Bridge, down Coney Street, Stonegate, Petergate, past Holy Trinity to the Pavement, and then back to the Minster and St Leonard's Hospital. There is no reason whatever to distinguish between the two routes.