

From Medieval Performance to Modern Text:  
Student/Scholar/Text/Manuscript/Scribe/Author/Staging/Actor/Audience/Performance

in Medieval English Drama  
with particular reference to the *Towneley Cycle*

an annotated reading list  
by CONRAD REITZ

***Aspects of early English drama.*** Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985.

A collection of essays on various topics in medieval drama, including music, staging, manuscripts, themes (such as divine and human justice, perseverance, gallantry, etc.), costume, role of the guilds, and so on. Includes some very interesting illustrations. Of particular relevance are *Scribes, texts and performance* by Peter Meredith (p. 13-29), and *Producing miracles* by Darryl Grantley (p. 78-91).

BRISCOE, Marianne G. and COLDEWEY, John C. ***Contexts for early English drama.*** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

In particular, the papers entitled: *What if no texts survived: external evidence for early English drama* by Alexandra F. Johnston (p. 1-19), *When is a text a play? Reflections upon what certain late medieval dramatic texts can tell us* by Donald C. Baker (p. 20-40), *Medieval staging and performance* by Stanley J. Kahrl (p. 219-237) and *Medieval acting* by John R. Elliott jr. (p. 238-251).

BURNS, Edward. ***The Chester mystery cycle: a new staging text.*** Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1987.

A modern version of the plays on *The Coming of Christ*, *The Life of Christ* and *The Redemption of Mankind*, prepared for production at Chester Cathedral in July 1987. Three evening-length productions in easily understandable language which assists in obtaining an understanding of the scope and meaning of the Cycle.

CAREY, Millicent. ***The Wakefield group in the Towneley cycle.*** Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1930.

A somewhat old but nevertheless interesting and informative analysis of the plays, including discussions on the sources, phraseology, plot, characterization, humour and realism of each. The role of the Wakefield Master is discussed in some detail.

CAWLEY, A.C. *Thoresby and later owners of the manuscript of the York plays (BL additional MS 35290)* In: *Leeds studies in English*, 11 (1980): 74-89.

An interesting discussion concerning the various owners of a manuscript of the York plays, including Ralph Thoresby (1658-1725), Horace Walpole (1717-1797) who bought it for one guinea in 1764, and Benjamin Heywood Bright, who paid 235 pounds in 1842. It was only in an 1844 Sotheby's sale catalogue that it was identified for the first time as a manuscript of the York miracle plays. William Hazlitt expressed concern that ownership of the manuscript was kept secret for fear of it falling into the wrong hands. One owner, the 4th Earl of Ashburnham (1797-1878) was notorious for denying scholars access to his manuscript, and was described as a "dog in a manger" - until in 1885 the 5th Earl gave Clarendon Press permission to publish an edition edited by Lucy Toulmin Smith. This manuscript is now in the British Museum.

CRAIG, Hardin. *English religious drama of the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955.

A classic and influential work, which provides a counterpoint to Kolbe's work (below). Craig addresses the issue of the genesis of the plays, i.e. whether the dramatic figures of the so-called Corpus Christi plays came from the liturgy of the Church and the religious processions, or whether they were created and developed through the plays themselves. In particular, chapter IV on the medieval stage and chapter VI, on the York-Wakefield plays are relevant and useful.

DAVIDSON, Clifford. *Positional symbolism and English medieval drama*. In: *Comparative drama*, 25 (1991): 66-76.

DAVIDSON, Clifford. and MASON, Nona. *Staging the York Creation and Fall of Lucifer*. In: *Theatre survey*, 17 (1976): 162-178.

GARDNER, John. *The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974.

A close literary analysis of the plays with respect to themes, such as decorum and Satanic parody, irony, Christology, structure and tone, black comedy, tragicomedy, etc. Includes an analysis of the authorship of the plays.

HELTERMAN, Jeffrey. *Symbolic action in the plays of the Wakefield master*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981.

A literary approach to *The Murder of Abel, Noah and his sons, The First Shepherd's play* and *The Second shepherd's play*, drawing attention to symbolic and realistic aspects.

KOLVE, V.A. *The Play called Corpus Christi*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966.

A classic and influential work, which demonstrates the relationship between medieval drama and the religious pageants and liturgy of the Middle Ages. Kolve argues that most medieval drama, and the York plays in particular, were presented as processional pageants, formed a unified progressive whole, and were cyclical in nature, showing the history of Mankind from the Creation to the Day of Judgment. Many critics have subsequently disagreed with Kolve, and taken issue with his arguments, which were based on unprovable assumptions and not supported by documentation. His analysis of themes and content of the plays are, however, valuable and insightful.

LUMIANSKY, R. M. and MILLS, David. *The Chester mystery cycle: essays and documents*. Chape Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983.

MEREDITH, Peter. *John Clerke's hand in the York register*. In: *Leeds studies in English*, 12 (1981): 245-271.

Many of the scribes who copied and annotated manuscripts of the plays are unknown and unnamed, but this paper provides little-known information about a scribe who provided annotations and comments in the *York Register* in the middle of the 16th century. An image is developed of the typical duties of scribes, and the payments that they received for carrying out these duties. John Clerke was *a respected scribe ... employed by the city, and as far as the play was concerned, given the task of checking the City's text. York's mayor and council had always exercised a careful overall control over the Corpus Christi play, though leaving the guilds to organize their individual pageants, and one thing besides the quality of the performance which they had always kept an eye on was the content of the play* (p. 264).

NELSON, Alan H. *The Medieval English stage: Corpus-Christi pageants and plays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

One of the best and most insightful surveys of medieval drama, organized by place of performance. The introduction reviews and evaluates the published research of Craig and Kolve (above) The author's primary purpose is to *discover how, when, where and for whom the Corpus Christi plays were performed*. [His] *secondary aim is to discover something of their origins*. (p. 11). In doing so, he gives a balanced response to the work of Craig and Kolve. The second chapter provides a detailed, minute-by-minute analysis of the York plays, in order to determine how they might have been staged processionally. He devotes a chapter to each of the city cycles, including Wakefield (p. 83-87), and argues that the Wakefield plays, which are found in the Towneley manuscript, are very similar to the York plays. However, whereas there is a great amount of external evidence concerning the York plays, in civic registers and elsewhere, the evidence for performances in Wakefield are exceedingly sparse. He concludes: *Since most of the Wakefield documents concern the presentational pageants rather than the play, perhaps the wisest course is to confess how little we know concerning the staging of the Wakefield dramatic cycle* (p. 87).

PALMER, Barbara D. "Towneley plays" or "Wakefield cycle" revisited. In: *Comparative drama*, 21 (1987-88): 319-348.

An interesting and informative review of the history and scholarship of the Towneley manuscript, bringing the story up-to-date to 1987. He is very critical of John W. Walker, a Wakefield historian who played a role in the discovery of references to the Cycle plays in the Burgess Court Rolls, but who has, according to Palmer, misled and misdirected scholarship for many years, and, in a footnote, he is even accused of misappropriating local materials from Wakefield Cathedral (p.345).

PURVIS, Canon J.S. *From minster to market place*. St. Anthony's Hall, York: St. Anthony's Press, 1969.

A useful historical overview of the *York Cycle*, with some interesting documentary examples and illustrations.

SHARP, Thomas. *A Dissertation on the pageants or dramatic mysteries anciently performed at Coventry*. East Ardsley, Yorkshire: EP Publishing, Ltd., 1973.

Reprint of the 1825 ed. Interesting example of early scholarship, making use of documentary sources in Coventry and elsewhere.

SPECTOR, Stephen. *The Composition and development of an eclectic manuscript: Cotton Vespasian D VIII*. In: *Leeds studies in English*, 9 (1976-77): 62-83.

A detailed analysis of the manuscript that contains the N-Town cycle of plays, in terms of poetic form and prosody, in order to discover the various strata of composition and transcription. The author states: *A study of this kind is necessarily speculative and entirely dependent on inference rather than historical fact. Still, disparate tests are occasionally so clearly corroborative that one is tempted to feel confident about the findings which emerge.*

*The Towneley Cycle: a facsimile of Huntington MS HM 1*. Introd. by A.C. Cawley and Martin Stevens. (*Leeds Studies in English*). Leeds: University of Leeds School of English, 1976.

A facsimile reproduction of the so-called Towneley manuscript, which probably dates from the last quarter of the 15th century, although this is by no means certain. It was named after the Towneley family, in whose possession it first surfaced at the beginning of the 19th century. It was purchased for the Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, Calif. in 1922.

***The Towneley plays.*** Ed. Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, for the Early English Text Society, 1994. 2 vols.

This is the definitive and scholarly edition of the manuscript. An earlier edition, edited by George England and Alfred W. Pollard, published by the Early English Text Society, had appeared in 1897. In this edition, Volume I contains the Introduction and text, and Volume II contains the notes and glossary.

***The Wakefield mystery plays.*** Garden City, Doubleday, 1963. Ed. Martial Rose.

A modern English translation, including a brief general introduction.

***The Wakefield pageants in the Towneley cycle.*** Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1958. Ed. A.C. Cawley.

This is a precursor of the Cawley/Martin edition (above) and includes extensive introductory notes, a discussion of the manuscript, influence of the pageants, staging, use of language, the author, the date and the dialect. The text of the Wakefield group of plays is included.

WILLIAMS, Arnold. ***The Characterization of Pilate in the Towneley plays.*** East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State College, 1950.

An analysis of the character of Pontius Pilate, as he appears in various plays, with respect to literary criticism, social satire, etc. Some discussion of the structure of the Cycle, and textual problems.

WASSON, John. ***Professional actors in the Middle Ages.*** In: ***Medieval & Renaissance drama in England: an annual, gathering of research, criticism, and reviews.*** 1 (1984): 1-11.

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