Mediaeval Drama in York

Throughout the late Middle Ages York was one of the main centres of drama in the days when drama mostly consisted on the so-called ‘Mystery Plays’. These were plays that dramatised sections of the Bible, usually a selection encompassing the world’s creation, fall, redemption and judgement. The York plays ran from about 1450 to 1569.

Mounting the Plays
In York these plays were put on by different guilds. Guilds were associations of craftsmen responsible for preserving and passing on the ‘mystery’ (‘skill’) of their craft. Usually the subject chosen for dramatisation would be appropriate for the guild concerned, such as butchers enacting the mortification of Christ and ‘Pinters’ [pinmakers] and paintmakers producing the crucifixion. (The Fall of Man in Everyman and Mediaeval Miracle Plays, ed. A. C. Cawley, London, Dent and Son, 1974, p143) Wagons were used as portable stages. Though this intrinsically limits the physical scope of the drama, modern productions have found impressive ways of exploiting the opportunities offered, as the following photos show.

The Crucifixion, Parliament Street, York, 2006, C Helen Richards

3 Sold. Heave up!
4 Sold. Let down, so all his bones
Are asunder on all sides sere. (Ins 223-224)
(The Crucifixion in Everyman and Mediaeval Miracle Plays, pps143-155)
Play Cycles
The most complete play cycles that survive, such as those from York and Chester, present the spiritual history of mankind from Creation to Judgement. A similar plan informs the Great East Window of York Minster. (See [http://www.salvonet.com/yorkweb/minster/b.htm](http://www.salvonet.com/yorkweb/minster/b.htm) for a brief history of the window, though not an exposition of its contents. See [http://www.bbc.co.uk/northyorkshire/content/image_galleries/minster_great_east_window_gallery.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/northyorkshire/content/image_galleries/minster_great_east_window_gallery.shtml) for details of the window. Often these are scenes that were made into plays, such as Cain killing Able (BBC 6).) In the Chester cycle the parts are bound together by typological exposition, in York they are not.

Northern Influences
The northern cultural roots of the York plays are emphasised by the alliterative verse that appears in plays such as *The Fall of Man*:

_Eve._ The worm to wite [blame] well worthy were;
With tales untrue he me betrayed.
_Adam._ Alas, that I let at thy lore,
Or trowed [believed] the trifles that thou me said, (Ins 122-125)

The expulsion from paradise; Museum Gardens, York, 2006 C Helen Richards

_God._ Now Cherubim, mine angel bright,
To middle-earth tite [quickly] go drive these two. (Ins 166-7)

*(Everyman and Mediaeval Miracle Plays, The Fall of Man, pps17-24)*

Elsewhere rhyme is used, such as in the ballad stanzas of *The Creation of Adam and Eve*:
God. In heaven and earth duly bedene  
Of five days’ work, even unto the end,  
I have completed by courses clean;  
Methinketh the space of them well spent. (Ins 1-4)
*Everyman and Mediaeval Miracle Plays*, pps 11-16).

York’s northern patriotism is never as aggressive as it is in *Secunda Pastorum*, the Second Shepherds’ play from the Wakefield pageants. Here the first shepherd mocks Mak’s southern accent:

*I Pastor. Bot, Mak, is that soothe?  
Now take outt that Sothren tothe,  
And sett in a torde!’* (lins 214-6)  
(‘But Mack, is that true?  
Now take out your southern tooth [accent]  
And sit in a turd!’)

(*The Wakefield Pageants in the Townley Cycle*, ed. A. C. Cawley, Manchester, the University of Manchester, 1958, *Secunda Pastorum*, pps 43-63)

Though Wakefield is now a relatively small town, its medieval prosperity and importance is shown by the existence of these plays.

*The End of the Mystery Plays*

Plays of this kind were suppressed in Tudor times thanks to Protestant suspicions about their Catholic origins and ‘idolatry’. The manuscript of the Wakefield plays bears evidence of censorship in the form of crossed-out lines that Cawley interprets as Protestant disapproval of Catholic doctrines. He cites similar evidence of alterations in the York plays of 1568, as the city authorities sought to appease Archbishop Grindal, a Protestant reformer. (*The Wakefield Pageants in the Townley Cycle*, pxiii). The attempts of the local councils of Wakefield, Chester and York to keep the plays going in the face of clerical opposition shows how much civic prestige was invested in these productions. Such attempts failed and the surviving plays were discontinued.

*Revival*

In 1951, as part of the Festival of Britain, the York mystery plays were revived, albeit in a form different to that of the Middle Ages. (see [http://www.yorkmysteryplays.org/](http://www.yorkmysteryplays.org/)). The plays were edited into a continuous piece, the language updated and the new synthesis became known as ‘The York Mystery Plays’. The original intention was to produce this cycle every four years; the site above records how problems of cost and site have affected the original intention. The revival of staging the plays as Wagon Plays has usually involved taking the play’s language more closely back to the mediaeval original and finding modern equivalents for mediaeval staging:
The Baptism of Christ: Christopher Brownbridge plays John the Baptist on a wagon in King’s Square, C2002 Maureen Brownbridge