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**English Mystery Plays – Staging Patterns  
and Orality Features**

B.A. Major Thesis

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I hereby declare that I have worked on this B.A. Thesis independently, using only the sources listed in the bibliography.

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# **1 Introduction**

Throughout the twentieth century, there has been a great rise of interest in medieval drama. There has also been a great shift in the interpretation of medieval plays. Medieval drama was recreated from a lower stage in the development of theatre to a mature and sophisticated genre that deserves the same attention as the theatre of the forthcoming periods. Modern attempts to stage medieval plays brought new insights into their theatricality. Warm reception of the audiences showed their vitality. Medieval plays now serve as a source of valuable information about the medieval society. Furthermore, they are also a rich source of inspiration for modern playwrights.

In my thesis, I am primarily interested in the methods of presentation and oral features of medieval plays. I will divide my thesis in two main chapters. In the chapter on staging, I will concentrate on various methods of staging and performance and the theatrical reality they create. In the chapter on orality, I will concentrate on the features of society which communicates without the aid of writing. I will analyse these orality features in the medieval plays. I will try to prove the influence that oral communication has in shaping the basic formative features of the plays.

## **1.1 Plays studied in the thesis**

In chapter on staging, I will concentrate on *The Entry to Jerusalem*. The play belongs to the York mystery cycle (extant text 1463-77). It combines the story of Christ's entry to Jerusalem (Luke 19: 28-44), the story of Zacheus in the sycamore tree (Luke 19: 1-10) and the story of Christ healing the blind man and the lame man (Luke 18: 35-43).

I will also work with *The Conversion of St Paul* (after 1512), ascribed to the East Anglian region. The story depicts Saul as the prosecutor of Christians, his conversion in Damascus and his baptism, and his return to Jerusalem as Christ's disciple (Acts 9: 1-31).

In chapter on orality, I will deal primarily with *The Second Shepherds' Play* (late fifteenth century) from the Towneley mystery cycle. The play combines an older farce about the shepherds, Mak, his wife Gil and a stolen sheep, with the story of Christ's birth (Luke 2: 8-20).

## **1.2 Introduction into the English medieval theatre**

Medieval English theatre is a term covering a large body of plays, performances and theatrical activities. The entire period of medieval drama spans for five hundred years.

Linguistically, it includes plays in Latin, Cornish and the Celtic languages as well as plays written in English. In terms of genre, medieval drama includes travelling minstrels, folk mummings, dramatizations of the Bible and secular plays. My primary concern in the introduction is to present the mystery plays in the context English medieval drama. I want to give a brief history of early medieval drama, to present the secular and liturgical influences that shaped the mystery plays. Then I want to present the East Anglian tradition and compare it with the mystery cycles performed in the cities of the north. Finally I want to present the morality plays and interludes, which are a sign of the forthcoming new theatrical tradition.

### 1.3 Early medieval secular and liturgical theatre

Medieval English drama virtually lacks any predecessor. The Roman theatre disappeared after the fall of the Roman Empire. As Chambers reports, this process was “accelerated by Christian hostility and barbarian indifference” (Chambers 2). There are few references to any drama in the period between 800-1000 A.D. Secular drama seemed to survive in various forms of minstrelsy, mime and clowning. The ecclesiastical records of the period are full of complaints and prohibitions concerning the *mimi*, *historiones*, *joculatores* and others. These entries show the hostility of the Church towards these kinds of folk entertainment, while their frequency suggests the popularity of these dramatic forms among the ordinary people. The repertoire of the entertainers included acrobatics, clowning, miming, dancing, singing and jesting (Tydeman 12). These entertainers did not perform drama as such, but their influence is apparent in the comic figures of the later plays. The characters like Mak in *The Second Shepherds’ Play*, or Servant and Ostler in *The Conversion of St Paul*, or A and B in *Fulgens and Lucretia* seem to be the offspring of these *joculatores*.

In the second half of the tenth century, drama seems to find its way to the church. Masses began to be accompanied by dumb play, costume processions or antiphonal singing<sup>1</sup>. The Latin *Visitatio Sepulchri*, a sung dramatization of the three Marys’ visit to Christ’s tomb, composed around 970, is considered to be the first liturgical play. Liturgical plays were performed to accompany the most important religious feasts. At first they concentrated on single episodes, but they soon began to extend their action to include other scenes like Passion or Nativity. The *Shrewsbury Fragments* which date to the end of the twelfth century already includes parts of Nativity, Resurrection and *Peregrinus* (Tydeman 8).

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<sup>1</sup> a dialogue styled singing when two halves of the chorus respond to each other

English mystery plays owe a lot to liturgical plays. The Biblical content made scholars suppose that liturgical plays moved from the church to the streets and gave rise to the great mystery cycles. They claim that liturgical plays stretched their action to include more Biblical episodes until they became too large for the clergy to handle and were handed down to secular groups.

Some scholars objected to this theory with a claim that the clergy did not intend to move the plays out of the church (Tydeman 8). There is also a missing interlink between liturgical plays and the cycles. A.H. Nelson claims that there is no evidence that the plays in any city 'were ever in the hands of anyone but the guilds' (Nelson 1). He argues that the town guilds adopted liturgical drama with the consent of the church and the cycle plays thus developed as a new form of theatre.

#### **1.4 The Corpus Christi feast**

The event that initiated the mystery cycles was the establishment of the Corpus Christi feast. In 1264 Pope Urban IV established the feast to take place on the first Thursday following the Trinity Sunday which fell some fifty days after Easter. This feast was later ordered by the council of Vienna in 1311. It celebrated the communion of both wine symbolizing Christ's blood and bread for his body. This was a result of a tendency towards a more "personal relation" to God and a "mystical union" with Christ (Goldstream 228).

The celebration of the feast began to spread slowly. It replaced pagan feasts held earlier and had become the midsummer feast of the Church. It was celebrated with a procession, which was later accompanied by pageants that lately developed into plays. The Corpus Christi cycles as dramatizations of the Old and the New Testament are first recorded in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The celebration took place in the cities of greater importance and was a matter of prestige. The most representative of the cycles comes from York; other surviving texts come from the cities of Chester and Wakefield. Plays from smaller cities did not survive and the N-town cycle was a travelling play; traces of its composition lead to Bury St Edwards (Fletcher, 165) and it probably toured the villages around the Norfolk and Suffolk border (Fletcher 167).

The central event of the feast was a procession to which the holy host was a central item. The host was carried in a shrine in the head of the procession. It was followed by the clergy, the most important men of the city and members of the guilds who carried torches. People watched this procession, some of them seated on special scaffolds, the less lucky of them crowded beneath. The procession was later accompanied by pageant wagons.



## 1.5 The York cycle

York was the second largest city in size as well as in importance. The city flourished in the years of economic prosperity after the Black Death. Its population had grown over ten thousand and it had become the most important city of the North. The Corpus Christi feast and the procession of pageants and plays were a matter of prestige. It was a serious enterprise and as such it was a subject to supervision by the city clerks. York demonstrated its prestige by the best maintained mystery cycle. We are now provided with a complete manuscript and a large body of other evidence (city records, fines etc.).

It is not clear how and when the plays came to existence. The terms *pageant* and *play* have virtually the same meaning in medieval terminology and we it is hard to derive what exact theatrical form the contemporary records mean. The extant text is dated between 1463 and 1477. As Beadle remarks, this is “exactly half way through the cycle’s documented lifespan” (Beadle 90). The text consists of 47 separate plays. There is a record of controversy in 1399 when commoners complained about too many pageants performed all over the city. The reaction to this complaint was the establishment of twelve fixed stations (Nelson 25). Another important document, contemporary with the extant text, shifts the plays from Thursday to Friday. There is no clear evidence if the plays were performed before the appearance of the text or if the establishment of the pageant route in 1399 concerned plays or tableaux.

The Corpus Christi feast, although it is a religious feast and its religious importance can not be disputed, belonged mainly to the guilds. The clergy, of course, was a governing authority over the feast, but the plays themselves seem to be in the hands of the guilds with the supervision of the city council. The plays were a financial burden, but they were a display of wealth and power for every guild. The distribution of plays in the *Ordo Paginarum* ascribed the most important plays concerning the Creation, the building of the Ark, Crucifixion, the Harrowing of Hell and the Last Judgment to the most important guilds (Beadle 95).

The guilds were basic economic units in the cities. They were closely tied communities, they tended to concentrate in certain areas (some streets in York named by different guilds serve as a reminder of the guilds that occupied them). The Corpus Christi feast was a great occasion to let everybody see the wealth of the guild. Biblical stories enabled the guilds to present themselves with appropriate dignity.

## **1.6 The Chester and Towneley cycles**

Further discussion of the remaining Cycles in this chapter is problematic. Unlike the York cycle, these cycles are not provided with so much evidence in the form of civic records. In the case of the Towneley Cycle, the text itself is the only source of evidence to support various theses.

The cycle plays from Chester were staged in three consecutive days. They were performed on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of the Whitsun week and they are arranged in three units celebrating the holy trinity: the God creator, Jesus Christ, the redeemer, and the Holy Spirit. The plays are thus not associated with the Corpus Christi and the Eucharist, but with the coming Trinity Sunday (Mills 117).

The Towneley cycle is associated with the city of Wakefield. Towneley is the name of the family that owned the manuscript when it was discovered for public (Meredith 158). With its borrowings from York and missing pageants it seems to be the most incoherent of the cycles. As Peter Meredith objects, this incoherency is not as disturbing in performance as it appears when reading the text (Meredith 158). The differences between the rich language of plays ascribed to the Wakefield Master and simple language of the other plays is not so evident in performance. What Meredith sees as the unifying factor is the “concentration on human nature” (Meredith 158). The characters that inhabit the cycle are not mere historical figures, they are strikingly human in their actions and language. Mystery plays connect Biblical past with everyday medieval present. This is a feature typical for all the cycles, but it seems to reveal itself the strongest in the Towneley cycle. Other cycles tend to interpret the Bible with certain distance. The Towneley cycle lets Biblical figures speak in the Northern dialect and combines the Biblical content with medieval stories. It is thus the cycle which depicts medieval society better than the others.

## **1.7 The East Anglian tradition**

Among the counties of England, East Anglia belongs to the areas with the richest theatrical tradition. From the surviving texts and evidence of theatrical performances, more than a third is geographically ascribed to East Anglia (Coldewey 189). Among these are also the N-Town plays and *The Conversion of St Paul* and the most spectacular of medieval plays, *The Castle of Perseverance*.

East Anglia was a rich prosperous agricultural area. Wealth was distributed among smaller towns and villages and, apart from Norwich, the area lacks a bigger urban centre. The most important economic units behind the plays were not craft guilds, but peasantry represented by parish churches.

Different social makeup and different demographic conditions brought different ways of financing and producing of the plays. The plays were not sponsored by the guilds, but they were staged mainly for profit, which was a substantial part of income of the parishes (Coldewey 202). Towns and parishes joined together and raised funds to organize festivals. Being a part of a festival, East Anglian plays were given to large audience. They are thus remarkable as spectacular events. The most outstanding of those plays is *The Castle of Perseverance*, with 35 speaking parts and a scaffold stage built in the round. The play is most significant for spectacular battles between the good and evil characters. The staging of *The Conversion of St Paul* needs three live horses and a dove. The plays also employ special effects such as lightning, tempest and belches of fire (*The Conversion of St Paul*). For Coldewey “The spectacular form of East Anglian plays flows naturally from their function as profit-making enterprises” (Coldewey 206).

Large festivals and great spectacular enterprises were probably held more or less periodically at specific venues, but a large proportion of East Anglian drama belongs to smaller travelling companies. Companies roamed the land in smaller towns and villages. Costumes and stage properties were sometimes available to hire. There is no wonder that those conditions produced the first professionals in the theatre business. Travelling troupes produced the first actors and large festivals gave rise to the profession of a property player (Coldewey 204), a semi-professional director.

## **1.8 Morality plays and interludes**

Compared with the Mystery plays, Morality plays do not deal directly with Biblical themes. According to Pamela M. King they “offer their audiences moral instruction through dramatic action that is broadly allegorical” (King 240). Even though they deal with universal truths within the religious framework of the Christian Church, they already represent a shift towards a more abstract dramatic treatment. Morality plays thus belong to a separate genre that proved influential for later moral interludes. Their influence can be seen mainly in preparing the grounds for the shift from Biblical towards more abstract and allegorical

themes. Among the surviving morality plays, the most significant are: *Everyman*, *The Pride of Life*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Wisdom* and *Mankind* (King 240).

Moral interludes belong to the youngest and the most progressive genre of medieval drama. As Glynne Wickham says, any attempt to define the genre with “certainty” or “precision” is doomed to fail (Wickham vi). The plays labelled as interludes do by no means belong to a coherent genre unit and they often mingle with morality plays. However, interludes can be seen as an interlink between medieval drama and the drama of the forthcoming Renaissance period. They introduce secular themes and they are open to fiction.

Interludes also share a more or less common attitude towards staging. Wickham says: “the stage must allow the playmaker complete freedom of movement in time and space, uninhibited by considerations of verisimilitude” (Wickham vii). Some interludes and moralities both share the economy of stage and costume. The theatrical reality is to great extend created by the actor and accepted by the audience. “The make-believe aspect of any form of drama was openly admitted and fully exploited” (Wickham vii). Those features are most evident in plays like *Mankind*, *Fulgens and Lucres* or *Hick Scorer*. The interludes are associated mainly with indoor venues. With their methods of staging and performance, they have the greatest impact on the forthcoming Renaissance drama.

The variety of medieval drama is enormous. Despite the variety of genres there are some features medieval plays have in common. They were staged for festive reasons. Each play is a complement to a feast. This could be a significant religious feast as in the case of the cycle plays, or a celebration of a birth or a feast held to welcome significant visitors as in the case of the interludes. Medieval plays were functional. Virtually all the plays have religious didactic content, or they operate within the doctrines of the Church. The functionality of medieval plays lies in presenting this didactic content in the popular way. Their primary concern is the audience. Another field where this functionality appears is in their staging.

## 2 The stage

Medieval theatre does not have any conventions concerning the stage. The plays were staged for festive reasons and their acting space was shaped according to the particular occasion they were held for (Twycross 37). Liturgical plays were staged in the church or in the churchyard, the cycle plays were staged on pageant wagons and in the streets, East Anglian plays usually used scaffold constructions, interludes are linked to dining halls, some plays used house-like constructions called mansions and some plays were simply presented inside a circle of onlookers. Each particular event dictated the place where the play was performed and each play exploited the theatrical possibilities of this place (Twycross 37).

Because the stage often used public spaces, the boundaries between the actor and the audience are not clearly defined. Veltruská says that the boundaries were “coextensive” with the existing social structure of the given place (Veltruská 129). The acting place in a church was the space before the altar, but in the street or in the hall it had to be created by the actors. Those fragile boundaries, the fact that the actor and the audience share the same space, together with the fact that the performance took place in the daylight create the theatrical circumstances typical for medieval theatre.

This theatrical space is on one hand deprived of the possibility to create the same illusion as a lighted scene of a modern theatre. On the other hand it allows for interaction with the audience and inclusion of the audience into the reality of the play. Medieval arts and theatre work more with representation as opposed to illusion. Medieval actors did not have to worry about breaking the theatrical illusion. They also did not have to worry to overcome the boundary between the stage and the audience. Medieval stage thus means not only the particular construction of a stage but also the space beneath it and among the audience.

The following chapter presents the most outstanding methods of outdoor staging patterns: processional staging and place-and-scaffold. Medieval theatre is audience oriented; its main aim is to draw its attention. I will examine the way dramatic action is brought closer to the audience in *The Conversion of St Paul* and *The York Entry to Jerusalem*.

### 2.1 Processional Staging - York

Processional staging is a pattern exclusive to the Corpus Christi cycles and among them it was most probably practised only in York and Chester. This staging pattern developed out of the Corpus Christi procession. This form of staging is impractical on one hand but theatrically economic on the other. A single play has to be performed at several stations,

which in the end requires hours of performing. The economy that is thus achieved lies in dividing a large crowd of spectators into several smaller groups.

Processional staging developed from pageants and mute tableaux in the Corpus Christi procession. These pageants, without dramatic text, were drawn in the procession with the host. Denis van Alsloot's painting *The Triumph of Isabella* depicts similar pageant wagons in the procession in Brussels. Although van Alsloot's painting is from the seventeenth century, it can give an idea what the wagons probably looked like.

Meg Twycross says: "True processional staging is more complicated to describe than it is to execute" (Twycross 39). The plays in York were performed at twelve stations. The performers gathered at the Toft Green, a meeting place near the first station, at 4:30 am. The *Fall of the Angels* would start with the dawn at The Trinity Priory. After the play was over, the pageant wagon was drawn to another station and freed the station for staging of *The Creation*. Thus the plays moved from one station to another until late in the evening when all the plays had been performed at all the stations.

Scholars argue about the practical possibility of staging all the 47 plays at the twelve stations in the course of a single day. The processional theory was most eloquently challenged by A. H. Nelson in his *Medieval English Stage*. According to his calculations (Nelson 25) the plays, starting at 5 am at the first station would have lasted at least until noon the other day. Nelson argues for a pageant procession through a city in the morning and staging of the entire cycle at a single station later in the afternoon or the day after. He also supports his argument with the 1399 controversy when the twelve stations were established and the document which shifts the plays from Thursday to Friday (Nelson 25). Nelson supposes that the original procession with the host, members of the clergy, followed by mute tableaux took place on Thursday through the given stations, and the entire play was then performed on Friday at a single station.

Despite Nelson's objections, modern productions in Toronto and York turned to processional staging. In the Toronto production in 1998 various companies staged successfully all the 47 plays at four stations in the university campus. The production started at 6 am and lasted sixteen hours. These modern productions verified processional staging, but also showed the time limitations. Nowadays, scholars admit the possibility of processional staging, but most of them break away from the claim of staging all the plays at all the stations. Beadle claims that some plays could have been performed "in tandem" (Beadle 99).

The greatest advantage of processional staging is the manageable size of the audience. Given the size of the streets in York, the number of spectators was limited. In the streets,

which are only a few metres wide and surrounded by overlapping houses, while the actors and the audience were almost touching each other, the plays must have achieved a great deal of intimacy.

Apart from intimacy, a small audience also amplifies the theatrical effect. A relatively small pageant wagon (although some of them could have been six metres high) placed in a narrow street could look impressive. When people tilt their heads back to follow the angels to the Heaven deck which is among the rooftops, they “get a real sense of height” (Twycross 48). If the wagon was placed in an open space and watched by a large crowd, the play could never achieve the same kind of an overwhelming effect.

The result of processional staging in York is that it achieves considerable theatrical effect by relatively modest means. The pageant wagons were small compared with scaffold constructions of East Anglian plays. The fact that the audience was small allows the actor to perform in the street without the risk that people standing in the back would not see him. A metaphorical effect that he achieves is that the audience becomes the part of the play. I will discuss these effects in the York play *Entry to Jerusalem*.

### **2.1.1 The Entry to Jerusalem – action in the street**

*The Entry to Jerusalem* deals with the episode when Christ is welcomed by the crowd of Jerusalem on the Palm Sunday. The dramatist added the episodes of healing the blind man and the lame man, and the episode of Zacheus in the sycamore tree. He also added eight honourable citizens to welcome Christ and a character of the Porter who acts as a messenger between the Citizens and Christ. He extended the dramatic action of the entry. This allowed him to place the Christ in the street and to emphasize the dramatic effect by Christ’s slow progress towards the pageant wagon of the Citizens which represents the city of Jerusalem.

The plot begins with Christ’s introductory speech. Then he sends Philip and Peter for the ass. Philip and Peter meet with the Porter, they inform him about Christ’s coming and he in turn goes to inform the Citizens. When the Citizens learn about Christ’s coming, they give their soliloquies to praise Christ’s deeds. The plot continues with Christ riding the ass. As he proceeds towards the wagon, he heals the blind man and the lame man and converts Zacheus. The action culminates with Christ’s final prophecy: “For stone on stone shall none be left, But down to the ground shall all be cast,” (lines 475-476), and the *Hail* speeches given by the Citizens. There are also two notes that require singing.

The presence of a real animal in the play shows that the action has to take place in the street. That the animal is real is suggested by the fact that Jesus needs to mount it: “Do on this

ass your clothes ye lay, And lift me up with hearts good (lines 275-276). The text also shows that the characters are a distance away from one another. When Peter and Philip meet the Porter he asks about Christ's whereabouts: "But tell me first plainly, where is he?" (line 86). This scene would seem strange if Christ was standing right beside him. The following speech that Porter gives as he goes to inform the Citizens (lines 101-117) suggests that he needs to go a certain distance before he reaches the wagon. This is the distance between the two central points of attention (Christ and the Citizens).

The play is the beginning of the passion sequence (Christ's introductory speech), but the inclusion of the extra episodes also emphasises Christ as the healer and redeemer. The extra episodes also helped to achieve balance in action and soliloquy. The main soliloquies that form the spiritual message of the play: Christ's introductory speech, Citizens reports of his deeds, Christ's final prophecy and the *Hail* speeches of the Citizens, are divided by dramatic action of the episodes.

In terms of theatrical space, the included episodes allowed to express the entry with real movement. It placed the actor among the crowd, where he can appeal directly to the audience. The audience is thus included in the reality of the play. The spectators become Christ's disciples and it seems as if Christ was entering the city of York.

The attention of the audience is divided between the Citizens on the wagon and Christ in the street. Christ slowly proceeds towards the wagon and these two points of attention then meet in the final scene. The cumulative effect of individual soliloquies reaches its peak with the repetitive *Hail* speeches and singing at the end.

## **2.2 Place-and-Scaffold**

More common method of open air staging is called place-and-scaffold. Geographically it is most prominent in East Anglia and Cornwall. The plays that survive from above mentioned areas are the most impressive mainly with their scale. Those were large spectacular events including up to 50 speaking parts. The manuscript of the *Castle of Perseverance* includes a drawing of the stage. It calls for the construction of the castle in the middle and various scaffolds arranged in the circle around. Another valuable piece of evidence is a miniature by Jean Fouquet, *The Martyrdom of St Apollonia*, which depicts a multi-scaffold scene with inserted constructions for the audience. Audience is also crowded under the constructions and around the central action. Those two pictures are central to the interpretation of plays attributed to the place-and-scaffold pattern.



The arrangement of the stage and the shifting of action from one scaffold to the other need something that would direct the attention of the audience towards the action. This was achieved with messenger characters and crowd marshals (also used in the Toronto revival of *The Castle of Perseverance*).

In some plays, a contemporary logic called for one stage for every represented location. Mary's journey to Jerusalem calls for the change of the stage, i.e. it can not be achieved by changing of the scenery or simply by announcing the change of location. This seems to be the case of locations like Jerusalem or Golgotha. Their importance would be downgraded by simple announcing of the change location.

### **2.2.1 The Conversion of St Paul and its staging**

*The Conversion of St Paul* is divided into three parts. The first part show: Paul as the prosecutor of Christians, the second shows his conversion and baptism and the third shows Paul as a disciple. The plot shows Caiaphas and Annas sending Paul to Damascus. As Paul rides to Damascus, he is hit by a lightning and he meets God, then he meets with Ananias who came to baptise him. In the third part, Paul's knights inform Caiaphas and Annas about his conversion. Caiaphas and Annas decide to punish Paul, but he is informed by an angel and in the end we are told about his flight. The part also contains an inserted scene with devils Belial and Mercury, written in a latter hand.

The play raised controversy about its staging. Some scholars claimed it to be a "promenade play", where the audience travels with the action and is led by a guide-character called Poeta (Twycross 62). Wickham argues that the word "procession", which has been "the root cause of the trouble" in the interpretation (Wickham 104), in fact means the progression of the plot. In the beginning, Poeta says that the actors will "proceed" a "process" (line 9). At the end of the first station, he asks the audience to "follow and succeed ... this general procession" (line 156-157). It is obvious that in the first case Poeta means the progression of the plot. In the second case, it is rather confusing that Poeta asks the audience to follow and succeed.

There is more evidence in the text which speaks in favour of Wickham argument. The scene, where Poeta asks the audience is optional. Poeta has already used the word "process" with the meaning of narration. At the beginning of the next station he uses it even more explicitly when he asks the audience "to hear ... our process" (line 363). He uses the word

“succeed” in the meaning of “listen”, as well as he uses the word “proceed” in the meaning of “tell”.

The only problematic issue seems to be the way Poeta greets and blesses the audience at every station. For example, at the third station Poeta greets the audience:

The might of the Father’s powerful deity  
Preserve this honourable and worshipful congregation  
That here be present of high and low degree. (lines 360 – 362)

The separate greetings at each station could mean that the audience has changed or that there has been a certain gap of time. If the audience travelled with Poeta, he would be more interested in presenting the new station and not in ceremonial greeting of the audience. The most probable explanation seems to be that the play was separated by substantial breaks of time when the audience left and returned again.

*The Conversion of St Paul* is a spectacular event. The play uses horses and pyrotechnics for a *fervent* that knocks Paul down from his horse and for *fiery flames* in the scene with Belial and Mercury. It needs two separate scaffolds; Jerusalem for the first and the third parts and Damascus for the second one. A raised construction is needed for God. The Jerusalem scaffold needs to be situated near a stable. The Damascus scaffold requires a mansion for Paul and needs to be situated near water for Paul’s baptism. Another raised construction is needed for God.

The action in *St Paul* is divided equally between the stage and the street. The notes require Paul and his knights to ride their horses “about the place (and) out of the pl(ace)” (line 140). The second part presents the most of dramatic action in the street before God’s scaffold when Paul is struck and blinded by a lightning accompanied with *great tempest*. Paul is then lead to Damascus which is separated from God’s scaffold. The distance is suggested by the length of dialogue between God and Ananias before the knights and Paul reach Damascus (lines 211-244). In the baptism scene, Paul and Ananias descent the scaffold to reach the water. Paul says: “Go you before, and after I shall sue” (line 313). This is the final scene of the second part. It provides a quiet counterpart to the dramatic beginning. It also emphasises the spiritual content of the play. The same kind of contrast is achieved in the third part when the scene with Belial and Mercury, full of farce and accompanied by pyrotechnics, is succeeded by the scene where Paul addresses the audience with his speech about pride, lechery and fornication.

Interactivity and communal character belong to the distinctive features of medieval drama. The shape of the medieval stage allowed the actors to cross the boundary between the

stage and the audience both physically and verbally. Medieval characters often speak directly to the audience, they often encourage audience response. They disappear in the crowd or they come down from the stage to meet the spectators face to face. Medieval actors did not need to pretend that the audience was not there and medieval stage is shaped according to this rule.

### **3 Orality**

Medieval plays share a lot of features which make them seem underdeveloped when compared with the modern plays. Their plots are episodic and repetitive, their characters are flat, their language is simple and illustrative and their intellectual content seems to be simple and unchallenging. The forth coming generations of plays offered tightly developed plots with heightened climaxes and psychological insight. On the other hand, when the plays began to be staged, the audiences were surprised by the fluency of their language and their dramatic impact. The actors were surprised how the text itself helped them to memorise long monologues. The plays that were considered clumsy and lengthy proved to be fresh, vivid and sophisticated pieces of drama. The question is how the plays can be sophisticated when they seem to be so deficient.

Applying modern standards to medieval plays only proves their deficiency. In the interpretation of medieval plays, we must understand why they were composed in the way that is so different from our standards. In the following chapter, I will analyse the features of oral communication in the plays to prove that the above mentioned deficiencies are not caused by the incapability of medieval authors; rather, they are features typical for drama in an oral culture.

#### **3.1 Oral culture**

In the illiterate or oral culture, people share knowledge orally. The simple observation that people speak and listen instead of reading and writing is only the top of an iceberg. What lies beneath is the huge, fundamental difference between the oral and literate cultures. The culture gap given by the orality-literacy difference is as big as the culture gap between Western European cultures and cultures of Native Americans.

The simple rule of listening instead of reading has far reaching consequences. To live completely without the aid of writing brings different system of storing and communicating knowledge (Ong 24). This system modifies the worldview in such a way that it is almost impossible for a modern, literate mind to imagine the way people in a primary oral culture think.

#### **3.2 Ong and oral cultures**

W. J. Ong says that, "Human beings in primary oral cultures [...] learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom" (Ong 9). An oral trained mind equals the literary mind in

the complexity and amount of information it can handle. The difference lies in the selection of information. Oral and literate persons would organise the same information in a different way. While the literate mind is trained to think in terms of labels and categories, the oral mind prefers illustrative examples and context. The difference lies also in preference. While oral mind is fully capable of abstraction, this kind of thinking is not useful in an oral culture. Thus, the difference between oral and literate cultures is not a matter of superiority or inferiority. It is a matter of different cultural habits.

Writing is a “technology” and as such it “restructures consciousness” (Ong 78). It fixes the words to the paper and distances the writer from the reader. Compared with spoken language it is static as opposed to dynamic and solitary as opposed to social. Writing encourages analytical distance while speaking encourages empathy. Writing encourages categorical and analytic thinking while speaking brings illustrative language and real life examples. Writing also fixes events in time; it helps to see their causes and consequences. It brings the notion of linearity of time. It also encourages individualism. Ong traces the development of this restructuring from the very beginnings when writing became to existence to the point when it became fully accommodated in human thought by the use of writing and print. He proceeds from Homer and the Bible through Poe down to Kafka and Beckett to analyse the development in literature (the treatment of plot and character) to trace the development of human thought (the perception of time, analytical thinking, introspection) (Ong 154).

Since Ong’s theories deal directly with the “deficiencies” I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I will use them to support my conclusions. In the next subchapter, I want to analyse the oral features in medieval plays, particularly in *The Second Shepherds’ Play*.

### **3.3 Oral features in medieval plays**

The composition of *The Second Shepherds’ Play* dates to late fifteenth century. It is not a record of purely oral communication, nor it is the oldest of the cycle texts, but with its emphasis on medieval everyday life it is a good example of oral residues in the written text. The human dimension which is added to Biblical figures obviously reveals a lot of details about medieval society.

### 3.3.1 Structure

Medieval plays are written in verse; none of them contains any parts written in prose. Does it suggest that verse was the only accepted artistic expression? If we concentrate on the functionality of medieval verse, we can come to a different than the aesthetic explanation. As E. M. Browne, the director of the York cycle revival in 1951 remarked: “We had to work very hard but we were greatly helped by the verse - it has tremendous power and it helps the actors very much” (Browne). Every medieval play is a constant flow of words, which is seldom interrupted. The function of verse is to preserve the fluency and enable the speaker to continue in his speech without interruption.

The text of *The Second Shepherds' Play* has a regular structure. It is organised in nine line stanzas with two parts, one containing a four line verse AAAA with inner rhyming, the second containing a five line verse A BBB A. Those units help the writer or performer to separate individual thoughts and ideas. Each stanza develops a certain idea. This idea is either developed in the next stanza or succeeded by a different one. The line of thought seldom changes its direction within a single stanza.

Coll, the first character appearing on the scene begins with complaining about the weather in the first stanza, then he devotes four stanzas to complaining about the masters and finally invites the other character with the last stanza. Gib comes onto the scene complaining about the weather and then he dwells on the matter of marriage for the next three stanzas. The story proceeds rhythmically in comprehensive units. The dialogues in the *Second Shepherds' Play* which occasionally break the stanza-idea logic do so with respect to the structure (often they appear only in the first or in the second part), or when the dramatic action is interesting enough that it allows the risk that some of the text will be misunderstood (and the action on the scene makes up for missed words).

Coherent units divide separate thoughts; they set the rhythm of the play. The audience gets accustomed to this rhythm and it becomes easier to follow the story line. The audience, at least unconsciously, turn its attention to the phrases that highlight the central idea of every stanza. The fixed structure also provides the actor with some time until he finishes the stanza more or less automatically. In those short gaps, he can stop and think about the idea of the next stanza so that he does not lose control over the text and he can continue without any harm to interruption.

### 3.3.2 Proverbs and formulaic expressions

Another feature of *The Second Shepherds' Play* is the frequent use of proverbs: "So long goes the pot to the water," ... "At last comes it home broken" (line 317 – 318), "Kind will creep Where it may not go"<sup>2</sup> (line 591-592). "Seldom lies the devil dead by the gate"<sup>3</sup> (line 229). Proverbs belong to common knowledge. When hearing the first words of a proverb we usually do not need to hear the rest. The meaning, which is sometimes so complex that it would take a few sentences to explain, comes to our mind immediately. With the use of proverbs, the text becomes easier both for the speaker and the listener. It takes much smaller effort on the side of the listener, even if he misses some words in the noise of the street. Speaker, again for the sake of fluency, saves some time to think what to say next. Proverbs were favoured also for their economy. Their abstract meaning was told in an illustrative, comprehensive and easy-to-remember way.

Another example of formulaic expressions apart from proverbs are more or less proverbial constructions based on comparison or contrast, such as formulas of work and reward, or investment and gain: "master, for the fare<sup>4</sup> that you make I shall do thereafter: work as I take" (line 165-166). or "in a strait<sup>5</sup> can I get more than they that swink<sup>6</sup> and sweat" (line 313-314). Those prefabricated mental constructions help both the speaker and the listener understand the message without greater effort in encoding and decoding it.

Medieval plays seldom intrigue the listener. The use of fixed verse structure, proverbs and easy comprehensible formulaic expressions help to achieve fluency and comprehensibility. Fluency is particularly important because when the communication is interrupted the person becomes isolated from the outside world. Comprehensibility is also important because it is one of the conditions of successful communication. Features that would modern audience find intellectually unchallenging, and thus redundant, were exactly the features that medieval audience valued because it kept them in contact with the action of the play.

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<sup>2</sup> Kinship will creep where it can not go. (i.e. only a parent could love his child). Coll comments on the ugliness of Mak's son, which is actually the stolen sheep hidden in the cradle)

<sup>3</sup> The devil is always on the move, Gib. speaks about Mak's wife.

<sup>4</sup> food

<sup>5</sup> pinch

<sup>6</sup> work

### 3.3.3 Illustrative language

The language that medieval plays use is illustrative. Abstract notions are explained with reference to real life situations, sometimes going too much into detail. In the beginning of *The Second Shepherds' Play*, when Coll complains that the farmers are oppressed by the lords, he does so with illustrative language:

We are so hammed,  
Foretaxed, and rammed,  
We are made hand-tamed  
With these gentlery-men.<sup>7</sup> (line 15-18)

Coll continues with a real life example: “They cause the plow tarry<sup>8</sup>” (line 20). These expressions provide Coll with enough practical evidence for a more abstract conclusion:

Thus they hold us under,  
Thus they bring us in blunder<sup>9</sup>,  
It were a great wonder  
And<sup>10</sup> ever should we thrive . (lines 24-27)

This example shows the need to relate abstract ideas to real life experience. It is not enough to say that the farmers are oppressed. Coll begins with examples of lords not allowing the farmers to work on the arable land, examples of the lords growing rich while the farmers starve, and he ends in saying: “This is how we are oppressed.” Coll relates the abstract notion of oppression to its representations in everyday life.

Why does Coll need so much space to express a single notion? For a modern spectator this seems like wasting of dramatic time. We are not given a hint of a thought to involve ourselves intellectually. Instead, we are given a full explanation with enough practical examples. If we analyse the abstract ideas that in medieval plays, we come to a conclusion that they are explanatory. Intellectual stimulation is not their aim.

This brings us to the different attitude of oral and literal cultures towards abstraction. While writing helps the reader to achieve analytical distance from the text, listener in an oral culture needs to anchor his or her knowledge in everyday reality. Writing helps us to think about words as signs and to take them out of their context and to think about their abstract meaning. An oral mind must “conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld” (Ong 42).

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<sup>7</sup> We are so hamstrung, overtaxed and beaten down (that) we are made slaves by these highborn men. (317)

<sup>8</sup> stop

<sup>9</sup> trouble

<sup>10</sup> if



### **3.3.4 Episodic plot development**

Medieval plays were formerly criticised for their episodic plots. It was due to the lack of a tightly developed plot that the plays were regarded as primitive forms of early drama. Modern standards require a plot that develops linearly, when events add to the dramatic tension until it is revealed by the climax and the story then ends in a denouement. Medieval plays do not follow these standards.

The plots of medieval plays are simple and predictable. The plays are episodic and the episodes sometimes do not even seem to belong together like the stolen sheep and nativity episodes in *The Second Shepherds' Play*. The plot is often already known or it is told in advance. There seems to be no effort to complicate the plot to achieve dramatic tension.

Oral culture tends to perceive time in a different way compared with literate culture. Writing can record events in time. People in literate cultures can review recorded events, they can go back and forth the timeline, and thus they get the sense of time as a linear development. For people in an oral culture time is a cycle of recurring events. The way medieval plays deal with of the plot comes from this cyclical perception of time. Rather than working with viewer's anticipation, the plays use cumulative effect. They repeat the certain idea until it culminates in the final speech.

### **3.3.5 Community and individual**

One of the basic features of speaking is that it requires a listener. Unlike writing, speaking can not be exercised without the immediate presence of the hearer. In an oral culture people are dependent on each other. Knowledge can not be acquired or communicated without human interaction. Thus, for the sake of preserving knowledge, oral cultures tend to be organized in close-knit groups (Ong 74). Thus we can try to judge the importance of the guilds and the importance of the Corpus Christi feast as a communal celebration.

The speaker and his audience form a unity. When same audience is asked to read a handout, each member of the audience "enters into his or her private reading world" (Ong 74). Reading is a "solitary activity" (Ong 69). It is natural that drama is the genre where the communal character of the oral culture reveals itself. J.L. Styan says that "theatre is an electric circuit between the actor and the audience". Medieval theatre, much more than the theatres of the forthcoming generations, emphasises the interactive element between the actor and the audience.

### 3.3.6 Direct address to the audience

One of the signs of interaction is the direct address to the audience. The boundary between the actor and the audience is not so clearly defined in medieval plays. The actors do not worry to cross this border both physically and verbally to invite the audience into the reality of the play. Christ in the York play of *The Crucifixion* addresses the audience: “All men that walk by way or street, Take tent you shall no travail tine<sup>11</sup>” (lines 253-254), or sooner in *The Entry into Jerusalem* he opens the play: “To me take tent and give good heed My dear disciples that be here” (lines 1-2). This direct address to the audience includes the audience into the play. The audience is thus invited into the theatrical reality to play the crowd greeting Jesus in Jerusalem and the onlookers on the hill of Golgotha.

In medieval plays it is also common to have an introductory speech given by one of the characters or by an impresario type of a character. The audience is informed in a way that is nowadays common in talk shows. In *Everyman*, there is a Messenger who opens the play: “I pray you all give audience, And hear this matter with reverence” (line 1-2). There is also a Doctor at the end who gives a final concluding speech. In *The Conversion of St Paul* there is a Poeta who opens the play:

Honourable friends, beseeching you of license  
To proceed our process, we may, under your correction,  
(Show) The Conversion of Saint Paul, as the Bible gives experience.  
(lines 8-10)

Poeta acts as a guide though the play. He gives conclusions to separate parts and guides the audience: “Another part of the story we will redress<sup>12</sup>” (line 165) and gives a conclusion at the end: “Thus we leave Saul ...” (line 649).

In medieval drama, there is a constant need to keep contact with the audience. Same as medieval audience needed to relate their knowledge to the real world, they needed to involve personally with the characters. People needed to absorb the knowledge communicated in the play in the context of human relations and they achieved it by personal involvement. Modern audiences prefer to keep distance from the action on scene. A modern spectator analyses the play and participate in it by intellectual involvement. The unity that functions between the actor and the audience is achieved at the intellectual level, when both the actor and the audience share the same thoughts.

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<sup>11</sup> Take heed that you miss none of my suffering. (220)

<sup>12</sup> rehearse

The oral character of medieval society plays an important role in the interpretation of medieval plays. Their modes of expression are derived from the way oral society communicates. Their form follows oral mnemonic patterns. By following those features of oral communication their qualities appear and they are best apparent when the plays are performed. All of their features draw the audience into the play. They may seem intellectually unchallenging on one side, but on the other they provoke great emotional response.

## 4 Conclusion

The aim of the first part of this thesis was to compare the staging patterns of English mystery plays and the possibilities they offer, to analyse the way selected plays use the particular acting space and to trace the effect they achieve.

The place-and-scaffold staging pattern is associated with larger audiences. The plays ascribed to this pattern tend to attract the audience with spectacular effects and action. In *The Conversion of St Paul*, the subject matter itself allows for the use of horses and pyrotechnics. The dramatist also added the episode with the devils to add to the spectacular effect.

Processional staging is limited by the size of the pageant wagon, but its advantage is the manageable size of the audience and the option to use the street as an acting place. In *The Entry to Jerusalem*, performing on the street level enabled a closer contact with the audience and it included the audience into the play, making its presence an active participation in the event.

Medieval plays are typical for their appeal to the audience. The fact that medieval stage does not have clearly defined boundaries combined with the fact that medieval theatre thrives on representation instead of illusion allowed the actors to address the audience directly without the danger of breaking the theatrical illusion. Medieval theatre does not employ illusion. It is a communal matter that is based on the interaction between the actor and the audience.

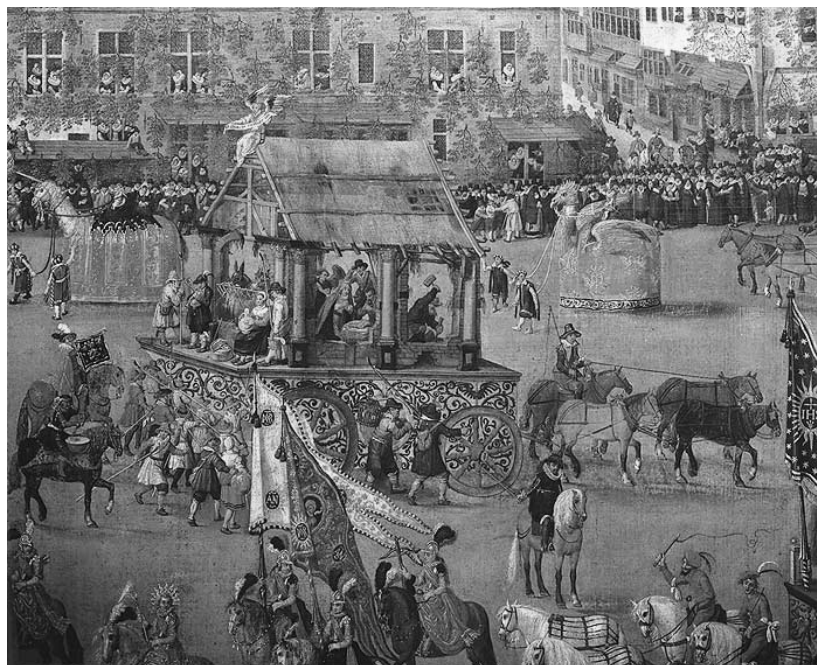
The aim of the second chapter of this thesis was to prove the influence of oral culture on the basic features of medieval plays. The aspects of oral communication are apparent in the use of verse, proverbs and formulaic expressions. Episodic plots are due to the way oral culture perceives time. And finally, the emphasis on interaction and the importance of the community contribute to the interactive character of medieval drama.

Thus the primary concern of this thesis was the communal character of medieval drama and its representations in the staging and in the texts of English mystery plays.

## 5 Illustrations



The *Martyrdom of St Apollonia* by Jean Fouquet



Detail from *The Triumph of Isabella* by Denis van Alsloot

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