

A MODERN MEDIEVAL MYSTERY PLAY:  
TAKING THE “MYSTERY” OUT OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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A MODERN MEDIEVAL MYSTERY PLAY:  
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A Project

by

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Abstract

of

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The Middle Ages in Europe is commonly referred to (at least as a popular culture stereotype) as the “Dark Ages.” The popular conception of this time is one where culture, depth of ideas and creativity were at a standstill. Through studying works of the Middle Ages (specifically medieval mystery plays), I have concluded that the above statements are false. The example of medieval mystery plays truly shows the dynamic, richly creative and deeply complex world of medieval theater and theology. Through producing a medieval mystery play, I plan to enrich the observer with an appreciation of medieval culture in its many aspects.

I used a wide variety of sources in this project. I researched books, online articles and scholarly journals to compile data and information about the cycle plays. Also, I employed artwork and film to facilitate my understanding of the visual and theatrical elements of a medieval mystery play.

Through my research and the production of my play, I came to numerous conclusions about the culture of the Middle Ages. Mainly, in Europe, the Middle Ages were a time when people of all classes enjoyed a fulfilling cultural experience. Specifically, through the development of theater outside of the liturgical setting, European citizens experienced a uniquely creative and deeply complex spiritual experience. The performance of a medieval mystery play brought to the audience an entire history of human sin and salvation through innovative dramatic and comedic devices. This experience was fulfilling to the citizens of the Middle Ages and, I believe, continues to be relevant and fulfilling to a modern audience.

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\_\_\_\_\_, Committee Chair  
Candace Gregory-Abbott, Ph.D.

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Date

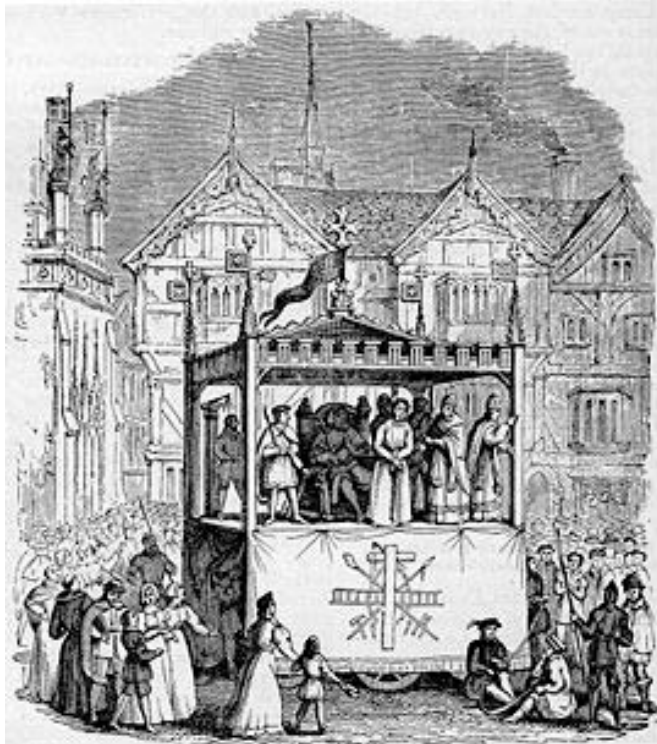
## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A heartfelt thank you to everyone involved in this project! The entire St. Francis High School community has shown their support and many have given of their time and I am eternally grateful for that. It is truly an amazing and inspiring community. Thank you to my project advisors- Dr. Candace Gregory-Abbott and Dr. Jeffrey Brodd for your time and expertise. I am immensely blessed to have the support of my family and one wonderful man in Bobby Williams- who is a constant source of support, joy, care, inspiration and faith. And of course, I thank God, for His grace and for the human ability to touch, inspire and stimulate through the arts and through theology.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS



1.1

[http://revistakatharsis.org/images/528px-ChesterMysteryPlay\\_300dpi.jpg](http://revistakatharsis.org/images/528px-ChesterMysteryPlay_300dpi.jpg)



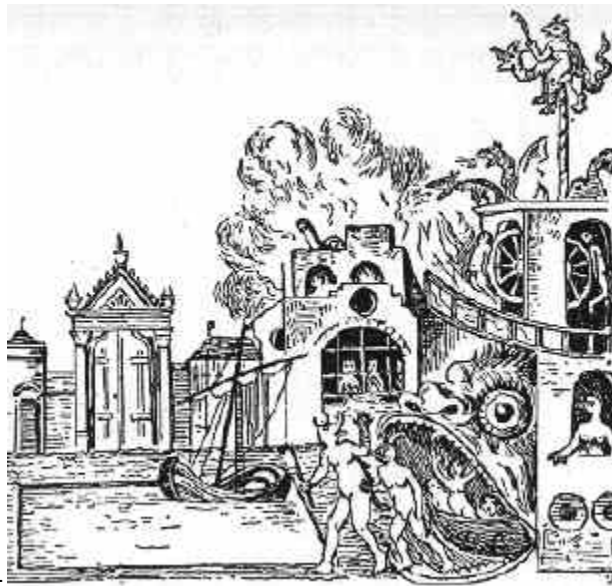
1.2

<http://www.wakefield.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/F23D221F-8CAF-4F0A-A09F-C9B207C2B698/0/MysteryPlay.gif>



1.3

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/images/ValHellMouthBW.JPG>



1.4

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/images/ValHellMouthBW.JPG>



## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Purpose

My project is an exploration of medieval theology and culture. Throughout my studies of the Middle Ages, I have constantly been astonished by the depth and intricacy of medieval thought. Before studying this era, I held the common belief in our modern culture that the Middle Ages in Europe was a time when culture and learning ceased. I believed people had no independent thought outside of the Roman Catholic Church and no personal understanding of the theological beliefs they claimed as their own. I naively believed that the medieval era lacked the beauty and complexity of my own culture and that the theater and theology of the Medieval Era must have been simplistic, embryonic and even childish. I affirmed that this was the popular belief in modern culture when I saw a bumper sticker which read, “There was only one time when the Church ruled the world...and it was called the Dark Ages.” This rather terse statement confirms the modern American perception of the Middle Ages as a time when culture and complex thought were stunted.

However, thanks to the numerous primary and secondary sources I have read and with the guidance and expertise of my professors, I have learned to see the error of such thinking. Contrary to popular belief, the medieval era was a time of innovation and complex thinking. A vibrant culture consisting of religious expression and dramatic creativity thrived during the Middle Ages. As far as artistic expression is concerned, the art of theater moved out of the liturgy and into the town. However, it is imperative to

remember that, even though drama moved out of the church and into the town square (therefore becoming less reverent and slightly more profane), the religious content of the plays remained. Therefore, the change from church to town square allowed for a wide variety of creative inventions in the field of theater and culture while preserving the spiritual substance of the plays.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, theological ideas flourished in the Middle Ages. Individually, citizens of medieval Europe understood the complexities of Catholic theology and, overall, had a deep and personal faith. The mystery plays of the Middle Ages not only illustrate these conclusions but also facilitate them. In other words, Europeans of the Middle Ages were culturally and spiritually uplifted and stimulated by the theatrical device of the mystery play; likewise, as modern scholars can see, through the accounts and reproductions of these mystery plays, the complexity of medieval culture and the heartfelt participation of its citizens is exposed.<sup>2</sup>

My intent through this project is to inspire a modern audience using the devices of the Middle Ages. While this mystery play reproduction contains a number of anachronisms, the purpose is not to be completely historically accurate but to bring the original essence of the mystery play to the audience. My goal through this project is to inspire and impress the audience and reader with the theater and religious culture of the medieval peoples. Hopefully, this will allow a modern audience to change their perceptions of the “Dark Ages” to a more realistic vision of medieval culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, (Great Britain: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1933), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Sandro Sticca, ed., *The Medieval Drama*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1972), 43-56.

## Scope

This project is meant to bring an appreciation and knowledge of the medieval mystery play to a broad audience. Therefore, the project entails a modern production of a mystery play. Originally, mystery plays consisted of a reenactment of up to forty-eight different plays from various biblical stories, usually spanning from the “Fall of the Angels” to the apocalyptic stories in the Book of Revelations.<sup>3</sup> The point of highlighting the most important biblical stories in chronological order was to give the audience a comprehensive experience of Christianity’s salvation history and the interaction between divine and human forces. Since the cycle plays included such an extensive list of biblical scenes, these festivals would start at 4:30 a.m. and would continue well past dark.<sup>4</sup> Since I did not wish to put my audience through such an ordeal, my production consists of only two plays- the “Fall of the Angels” and “the Annunciation” (both from the York cycle- 1437-1477 CE). These two plays were carefully chosen for their entertainment value and also their significance to the medieval mindset (as both Lucifer and Mary play major and complex roles in the theology of the Middle Ages). Hopefully, through linking these two plays together, the audience will see the connection between the entrance of evil into the world, through arrogance (in the “Fall of Lucifer”), and the return of good into the world through the supreme humility and obedience of Mary. While there is no way to completely substitute the experience of seeing all the cycle plays together, my intent is to use the two plays discussed above as an abbreviated version of sorts. The stories of the

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Beadle and Pamela King, eds., *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xii-xiv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, xvii.

entrance of evil into the world, and the subsequent salvation of humanity through one woman's acceptance of God's will, are the perfect stories to show the interaction of the divine and humanity, specifically, humanity's earthly suffering from denying God and its salvation through obedience to God.

This production, which took place on April 18<sup>th</sup> 2010 at St. Francis High School in Sacramento, California, employed the St. Francis community as its actors. Using a Catholic school for the venue and for the talent of this production was fitting since the medieval versions of these plays also would have been produced by a Catholic population. This population more easily understands the content and intent of the original plays and will be able to connect to the spiritual elements involved. This is important, although obviously not a necessity, because my purpose in producing this project is to illustrate to the audience the complexity and depth of medieval spirituality and theology. Also, many of the actors included in the play are currently (or have in the past) studied theater and acting. This is also an important element since my other purpose in producing this play is to show the richness of medieval theater.

### Significance

The significance of this project will be to inspire its audience to a greater appreciation and understanding of medieval culture through its theater and theology. For a modern audience, the play (with its outdated language and theatrical techniques) may seem boring or stagnate. The challenge for myself and the other players is to show our respect for the piece through our acting and, therefore, infect the audience with our enthusiasm as well as reverence for the medieval mystery play. Typically, our modern society views the Middle Ages simply as a “jumping off point” for the Renaissance or even as a culturally void period of European history. I assert that this assumption is completely false and that the Medieval Era practiced its own unique, creative and complex culture deserving of our respect and attention. Therefore, my intent is for the audience of the play, as well as the reader of this paper, to gain greater knowledge about and deeper appreciation for medieval European theater and theology.

### Limitations

The main limitation of this project is the lack of complete historical accuracy. While every attempt was made to be as historically accurate as possible, many anachronisms exist in the play. The reasons for such anachronisms have mostly to do with monetary limitations as well as technological limitations. For example, the play utilizes costume pieces made of modern materials not available to a medieval production. Moreover, due to the inaccessibility of wireless microphones in an outside arena as well as many modern actors' inability to project as efficiently as a medieval performer would have, a number of standing microphones have been used. Obviously, this technology was not available during the Middle Ages. Moreover, live singing and musicians could not be procured for this event due to the costs of hiring such performers; therefore, pre-recorded music and singing was employed.

However, even through the numerous historical inaccuracies, I believe the audience will gain a sense of medieval culture and will appreciate it as such. Even through such inaccuracies, which occurred due to a lack of professional theatrical equipment and talent on my part, the true spirit of the medieval plays persists. Even though admittedly unintentional, my production actually celebrates the organic nature of original plays through its lack of professionalism. In the theater of the Middle Ages, guilds (or communities of specialized professionals from many different areas of medieval life) produced plays with little or no professional theatrical assistance, often

using what resources were readily available in order to produce their plays.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, my production keeps this spirit alive through its organic nature.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Beadle and Pamela King, eds., *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xii-xvii.

### Definition of Terms

*Mystery (or Cycle) Play*- “a medieval drama based on scriptural incidents (as the creation of the world, the Flood, or the life, death and resurrection of Christ).”<sup>6</sup>

*Hell Mouth*- “In medieval art, the hell mouth was a stylized painting in which the entry to hell resembles a gaping demon’s mouth...Eventually, when medieval theater developed, it was common to paint the entry onto a stage so the entry would resemble a gaping demon’s mouth. This ‘hell mouth’ would either be located on one side of the stage or it would be a trap-door in the bottom of the stage. During morality plays and mystery plays, actors playing demons would enter through the hell mouth in order to dramatically grab sinners and drag them off to hell.”<sup>7</sup> Please refer to figures 1.3 and 1.4 of the “Illustrations” section.

*Pageant Wagon*- “wheeled vehicle used in the processional staging of medieval vernacular cycle plays. Processional staging is most closely associated with the English cycle plays performed from about 1375 until the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century in such cities as York and Chester as part of the Corpus Christi festival...Each play in the cycle may have been mounted on an individual pageant wagon and performed at different locations throughout the vicinity. The pageant wagon may also have

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<sup>6</sup> “mystery play.” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2010. “Merriam-Webster Online.” 11 March 2010. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mysteryplay>>.

<sup>7</sup> “hell mouth.” Dr. L. Kip Wheeler. 2010. “Carson-Newman College: Literary Terms and Definitions.” 11 March 2010. <[http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit\\_terms\\_h.html](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_h.html)>.



been drawn alongside a scaffold wagon, using the scaffold as a temporary stage...”<sup>8</sup>

Please refer to figures 1.1 and 1.2 of the “Illustrations” section.

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<sup>8</sup> “pageant wagon.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2010. “Encyclopedia Britannica Online.” 11 March 2010. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/438245/pageant-wagon>>.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Source Materials

While much conjecture has been made as to the form and content of the mystery plays, precious few source materials do exist. For this project specifically, numerous transcripts of the cycles were read for content and ease of listening for the viewer. After reading the Wakefield, Coventry, Chester and York cycles, I decided to limit my project to the York cycle. The York cycle was chosen for its entertainment value as well as its employment of a more popular, canonical narrative, whereas other cycles use apocryphal texts and stories which a modern audience would not be familiar with. Therefore, the source materials discussed will all come from sources specifically dealing with the York cycle and its production.

To fully understand the cycle plays, one must look back to its origins- the liturgical drama. It is common to believe that the medieval Catholic Church stifled all forms of dramatic expression. However, if one looks closely at the form of the liturgy in the Middle Ages, one sees numerous dramatic elements which survived and morphed in the cycle plays. Jody Enders sums up this sentiment in her book, *Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama*, by quoting two opposing scholars' views on the medieval Church and its relation to dramatic development: "It seemed to O.B. Hardison that E.K. Chamber's view that "drama originated *in spite of* Christianity, not because of it," was "unlikely to encourage scholars to seek explanations of the form or effect of medieval

drama within the framework of medieval Christianity.”<sup>9</sup> As Hardison (and Enders) pointed out, scholarly inquiry into the medieval cycle play must begin with a look at the liturgical drama in order to understand the evolution of both drama and religion in the Middle Ages. As anyone familiar with the Catholic mass knows, the mass is broken up into two parts- the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Eucharist is, essentially, a re-enactment of the Last Supper and of Jesus’ death and Resurrection. In this part of the mass, the priest acts as Jesus while the congregation acts as the disciples (historically and symbolically). Through this re-enactment, the mass has, since its inception, been a form of drama. With the dialogue between the priest and congregation, another important element of medieval drama arose through the influence of the mass. Scholars know that this dialogue between performer and observer (whether it be spoken or sung) was important in medieval worship because of the lists of service books which survive from the Middle Ages. These medieval service books include the, “*sacramentarium*, containing parts said by the celebrant, a *graduale* containing parts sung by the chorus, with music...and a volume containing rubrics, or directions, called the *ordinarium*.”<sup>10</sup> This, along with many other source materials, supports the belief that the liturgy of the Middle Ages gave rise to the drama of the cycle plays.

From these liturgical origins, the cycle play moved outside of the church building and into the public square. Since the church could not possibly produce an entire cycle play by itself, a church official would divide up the stories between the different town

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<sup>9</sup> Jody Enders, *Rhetoric and The Origins of Medieval Drama*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1933), 20.

guilds while the church still maintained oversight control of the final product. In fact, a church official would often act as a master of ceremonies and even fine guilds who got off track from the approved content and length of their scene. The evidence for this lies in the Woolbrokers' play of the "Supper at Emmaus," where the line is written: "Here may we not mell more at this tide, For the process of plays that presses in plight" <sup>11</sup>

From this source material, scholars can infer that the plays were regulated and must have run in a very organized fashion in order to produce any kind of coherent production.

This production deals specifically with the York cycle, which formed out of the celebration of Corpus Christi. The plays were "originally written in the Yorkshire dialect of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries." <sup>12</sup> In its modern translations, however, great care was taken to keep the original wording and rhyme scheme while using the modern equivalents of words. The translation used for this project comes from Reverend J.S. Purvis' book, *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays*, <sup>13</sup> which was published in 1957. This translation gives a modern audience an accessible script while maintaining the original feel and content of the medieval translation. For a full review of Purvis' translation please see Chapter 4.

As briefly mentioned earlier, medieval mystery plays featured a number of individual plays which, when performed in sequence, formed the entire production. Each individual play was assigned to a town guild. The guild was then responsible for the

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Beadle and Pamela King, eds., *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xix.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, xxix.

<sup>13</sup> J. S. Purvis, *The York Cycle Of Mystery Plays: A Complete Version*. (London: SPCK, 1984), 15-19, 79-85.

costumes, sets and acting for their particular play. A medieval guild consisted of a group of individuals from the same trade who lived, worked and worshipped in close proximity to each other. Richard Beadle and Pamela King describe the guilds as, “the principle units of social and economic organization in medieval English towns in general”<sup>14</sup>

Through this quote, one begins to form a picture of the guilds as close-knit groups whose profession directly impacted their social life. For instance, if one were a member of “the Potters” guild, one would live with, go to church with and work with other Potters.

Because of their professional and social ties, when a guild received an assignment to perform a certain play, the guild took much personal and professional pride in their work.

No one knows exactly how the plays were assigned to each guild, however, the symbolism is obvious in many cases. For example, “the Fishers and Mariners” guild’s production of “The Flood” was obviously assigned to them due to their expertise in the area of seafaring.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, guilds would often use the materials and knowledge associated with their trade to construct sets, props and costumes. Some evidence exists, however, that guild members hired actors, musicians and even directors in some cases to produce their plays.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, even though some degree of professional theater was employed, these cycle plays were an unmistakably organic expression of a guild’s spiritual and religious beliefs. Richard Beadle and Pamela King explain the assignment of each

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Beadle and Pamela King, eds., *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xv.

<sup>15</sup> J. S. Purvis, *The York Cycle Of Mystery Plays: A Complete Version*. (London: SPCK, 1984), 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Beadle and Pamela King, eds., *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xvi.

guild's play, and its spiritual significance to the guild, as such, "these [each guild's] 'appropriate' assignments probably had much to do with the idea of the sanctity of a craft's daily labour, its part in the divine eternal scheme of things and the history of man's salvation, rather than the crude modern notion that the guilds used the plays to 'advertise' their products."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, each guild's production connected their economic, social and religious lives into a true expression of medieval culture, free from the established conventions of the modern, professional theater as well as the crass motives of modern marketing and business.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, xvi.

### Other Sources

The secondary sources used in this project mostly come from the numerous prefaces and introductions of the works cited in this paper. These introductions provided imperative background and commentary for the project and helped in the many stylistic decisions employed in the project. These will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 (where the stylistic elements are explored in depth). However, two books specifically aided me in their secondary commentary. The first book, Rosemary Woolf's *The English Mystery Plays*,<sup>18</sup> chronicles the importance of the different literary and stylistic elements of the plays from a medieval perspective. The second text is *Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual*.<sup>19</sup> This collection of essays regarding medieval drama gives a background to the many stylistic elements employed in this project and, again, will be given an in-depth look in Chapter 3.

Lastly, an important secondary source for this project has been the numerous revival productions of the cycle plays in the modern era. An abbreviated version of the York cycle was performed in York, England in 1951 and, after great success, again in 1954. This version only lasted about three hours and was set on a contemporary stage, not in a pageant style as in the Middle Ages.<sup>20</sup> Inspired by the 1954 version, a theater group from the University of Leeds decided to produce a more accurate version of the York cycle in 1975 by assigning different scenes to different groups at the university;

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<sup>18</sup> Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 105-131, 159-181.

<sup>19</sup> Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson, ed., *Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972), 64-81, 116-147.

<sup>20</sup> J. S. Purvis, *The York Cycle Of Mystery Plays: A Complete Version*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957), 8.

and, in 1977, in Toronto, the York cycle was produced in its entirety, with different groups producing different scenes as well as pageant wagons that moved in a parade-like route.<sup>21</sup> Whether one considers the abbreviated or more accurate modern versions of the York cycle, the wisdom gained from such modern attempts to recreate the past are crucial to this project. While this project is not attempting to be historically accurate, it does employ some of the imaginative ways that the modern producers attempted to both re-enact as well as re-invent the York cycle mystery plays.

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Beadle and Pamela King, eds., *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xxvii-xxix.



### Synthesis of Literature

Through reviewing the many primary sources of the York mystery plays, one begins to see a clearer picture of the style of writing of the Middle Ages as well as of the religious mindset of a common citizen of medieval Europe. The texts seem to show a deeply spiritual understanding of the concept of salvation history and humanity's place within that scheme. And while, to a modern audience, the text may be challenging or even seem stale or infantile in its dramatic techniques, if one takes the time to study the history and evolution of the cycle plays (through scholarly commentary), one forms a great appreciation for the imaginative and complex ways in which the medieval person understood the portrayal of religion and culture through the medium of drama.

Moreover, through studying the modern interpretations of the York cycle, one not only gains an appreciation for the challenges of bringing the past into the present but also is inspired by the power of the original texts as well as by the modern dramatists who have brought this medium back to life. Reverend J. S. Purvis sums up the unique relationship of the modern appreciation of this medieval form by stating:

As drama, these play exhibit many crudities, many faults of inexperience...But along with these crudities of the immature, there are passages of remarkable dramatic power...and a sense of characterization and psychology...These stand by their own right, even with audiences accustomed to all the devices and manners of the modern theater. There are scenes and speeches of a most deceptive apparent artlessness and simplicity, yet of a quality to test the capacity of even great actors and actresses. That work of such high order could come out of the English Middle Ages is another of the valuable discoveries which this Cycle may reveal to us...Aspects of medieval life and thought which have been hitherto dimly seen or quite unsuspected begin to claim our notice, and at large may do much to correct

our perspective and our sense of proportion, while they reveal a new importance and give us a new pride in our English heritage.<sup>22</sup>

This quote eloquently describes the importance and relevance of the medieval mystery plays in our modern world. A scholarship of both the medieval texts as well as modern texts help inspire an appreciation of the York cycle in the Middle Ages, while giving a current audience the tools to interpret the cycle into modernity.

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<sup>22</sup> J. S. Purvis, *The York Cycle Of Mystery Plays: A Complete Version*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957), 12-13.

### Chapter 3

#### METHODOLOGY

As stated previously, due to the inability to put on an entire cycle, only “The Fall of Lucifer” and “The Annunciation” plays were chosen for this project. The “The Fall of Lucifer” was chosen because of its entertainment value and linkage to a medieval Christians’ understanding of evil. Moreover, “The Fall of Lucifer” play features an important element in medieval drama. This is the element of audience participation. Audience members often booed and shouted at Lucifer and his minions when they came out of Hell.<sup>23</sup> In this project, actors are scattered throughout the audience to incite the audience to boo at this point in the play. Audience participation is an important element in medieval drama because of its evolution from the liturgy. However, this audience participation is much more raucous than the reverent and ordered liturgical form. Hence, one sees the evolution of audience participation out of the sacred setting of the church and into the profane setting of the public square.

Other important elements from “The Fall of Lucifer” which portray the medieval mindset and dramatic sensibilities are the play’s treatment of both God and Satan. God, with some exception, is almost always shown higher up than the angels and Hell- God in this project will be standing on a platform. Moreover, God is almost always shown with anthropomorphic characteristics. According to Rosemary Woolf, author of *The English Mystery Plays*, “though He [God] appeared as God the Father, He was yet the three persons of the Trinity. In all the plays this problem is solved by an opening speech in

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Kalb, *The World of Theater: The History of Actors, Singers, Costumes, Audiences and Scenery*. (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1995), 7.

which God defines Himself.”<sup>24</sup> In this production, God is portrayed by an older gentleman- thus keeping with the traditional medieval view of God while his speech addresses God’s ethereal presence.

As far as Satan is concerned, medieval productions show Lucifer as beautiful before his fall and heinous after his fall. For a medieval mindset, an ugly person would be one with beastlike qualities. As Woolf states, “In medieval iconography...the devil may be shown half man, half beast, erect like a man, but with claws, horns, bat’s wings, tail and perhaps with an animal face. He is often hairy like an animal.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, in my production, Satan is portrayed, at first, with a more colorful and beautiful robe than his fellow angels; and, after the fall, he is shown with a tattered and soiled robe, animal fur on his back and a beastly, distorted mask for his face. In this way, Satan shows how, for the medieval viewer, his pride caused his downfall from the most beautiful creature to the ugliest creature- one even less than human but of a beastly form. Specifically, the mask is used (instead of more modern face paint) to show how dramatists in the Middle Ages would have handled turning a normal man into a monster. The book, *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, addresses this issue by stating that, “the main way of dealing with these characters was to conceal the players behind masks.”<sup>26</sup> Evidence for this lies in medieval ledgers which include “devils’ faces, visors and wigs for evil

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<sup>24</sup> Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 106.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 110-111.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Beadle and Pamela King, eds., *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xxiv.

souls.”<sup>27</sup> In this project, the character of Lucifer puts on a mask after his fall to signify the distortion of his soul through his outer appearance.

Furthermore, a hell mouth will be employed for the fallen angels to go through in their descent into Hell. The hell mouth, usually a menacing, beast figure whose mouth would be wide enough for the fallen angels to walk through (refer to figure 1.3 and 1.4 of the illustrations), would be symbolic of the contrast between Heaven and Hell. The hell mouth often breathed smoke and fire<sup>28</sup> and, while I will not utilize real fire in my play, smoke will come out of the beast’s mouth and the gatekeepers of Hell will hold torches. These elements will all work to signify a medieval understanding of evil and Hell, with all of its chaos and harshness, and of its sharp contrast to Heaven- a peaceful, orderly environment.

Both the hell mouth and God’s platform are moved into place at the beginning and moved back off stage at the end of the play. The reason for this is to illustrate to the audience the difference between the audience coming to the play and the play coming to the audience. Both of these techniques would have been employed in the Middle Ages so I am including both forms in my productions to give a fuller experience of medieval drama.

This production utilizes a short intermission. While the traditional medieval cycle play would not have had an intermission, since this production will be on a stationary stage instead of a moving wagon, a short intermission involving a medieval folk dance

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, xxv.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 1.

must be employed in order to change sets. There is evidence, however, that cycle plays would have featured music and dancing, either in the plays themselves or before or after the festivities. According to Howard Mayer Brown, in his essay “Musicians in the *Mysteres and Miracles*,” “As one more decorative element, music certainly had an important place in these mélanges of realistic illusion, dazzling display and pedantic edification.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Brown also quotes a scene where, “the daughter of Herodias, dances a morisque to the sound of pipe and tabor.”<sup>30</sup> For this reason, I feel it appropriate to include music and dancing in my production.

Finally, this production includes a re-enactment of “The Annunciation” scene from the York cycle. This scene, which details Mary’s acceptance of God’s will for her and, subsequently, humanity’s salvation from the evil brought into the world through Lucifer’s fall, is meant to be much more simplistic than outlandish “Fall of Lucifer” play. For example, the blocking for the scene includes numerous pantomimed actions as well as tableaux poses. This technique was utilized in liturgical drama and definitely crossed over into the cycle plays. This style of blocking made the plays familiar for the audience and easily followed from a distance- as the pageant plays by their nature needed to be. Evidence for these tableaux poses comes from a quote from a duke who observed the cycle plays. This duke describes the actors as, “images upon a wall.”<sup>31</sup> In this way, “The Annunciation” scene employs stationary poses to portray character and situation to the audience.

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<sup>29</sup> Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson, ed., *Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 81.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 125

The focus of “The Annunciation” play is primarily on Mary. A commoner in the Middle Ages would have had a deep appreciation for Mary as co-redemptrix with Christ. Because of medieval society’s extreme veneration of Mary, this production includes her story in order to highlight her importance. As Sandro Sticca states in his essay, “The Literary Genesis of the Latin Passion Play,” Eve, “by her disobedience, brought death upon the human race, so Mary, by her obedience, brought salvation.”<sup>32</sup> Sticca goes on to state that, “Mary’s grandeur and influence she exercised, by virtue of her maternal authority, soon [allowed her to be] regarded as the mediatrix of all graces, the suppliant intercessor before the throne of God.”<sup>33</sup> This production highlights Mary’s importance in the salvation narrative through the content of the play as well as through small symbolic gestures. For example, Mary enters the scene carrying roses. In medieval art, as evidenced in numerous Gothic cathedral’s rose windows, Mary is symbolized by the rose because of her depth and beauty. This production utilizes that imagery for the audience.

The differing methodologies employed in this production are all meant to communicate the overall intent of this project. Other than the unavoidable historical discrepancies, every effort was made to keep the plays as accurate as possible. In this way, many decisions- concerning costuming, setting, blocking, props, etc. - were made with the original, medieval production in mind. Through taking every effort to convey the theological and theatrical elements of the Middle Ages to the audience, this project (through both the production and the paper) will educate and inspire its viewers to an appreciation for the complexity and creativity which thrived in the Middle Ages.

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<sup>32</sup> Sandro Sticca, ed., *The Medieval Drama*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1972), 56.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 57.

## Chapter 4

## PRODUCTION

The following is a transcript of the script used in the production of the play. It is from J. S. Purvis' version of the York Cycle and is quoted from his book, *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays: A Complete Version*:

The Tannours

*Deus pater omnipotens creans et formans cellos angelos et archangelos  
Luciferum et angelos qui eo ceciderunt in infernum.*

God Ergo sum alpha et O, Vita, Via,  
Veritas, Primus et Novissimus.  
I am gracious and great, God without a beginning;  
I am maker unmade, and all might is in me.  
I am life and way unto weal winning;  
I am foremost and first; as I bid shall it be.  
My blessing in joy shall be blending,  
And fall from harm to be hiding;  
My body in bliss aye abiding,  
Unending without any ending.  
Since I am maker unmade, and most high in might,  
And aye shall be endless, and nought is but I,  
Unto my dignity dear shall duly be dight  
A place full of plenty, at my pleasure to ply.  
And therewith as I will I have wrought  
Many divers doings amain,  
Which my work shall duly contain,  
And all shall be made even of nought.  
But only the worthy work of my will  
In my spirit shall inspire the might of me;  
And in the first fitly my thoughts to fulfill,  
At hand in my blessing I bid that here be  
A bliss all-protecting about me.  
In the which bliss I bid that be here  
Nine orders of angels full clear,  
In love everlasting to lout me.  
*Then the angels sing: Te Deum Laudamus te dominum Confitemur.*  
Here underneath me now an isle do I name,  
Which Isle shall be earth now; therefore is all



Earth wholly and Hell, and this high place is  
 Heaven.  
 And all that wealth shall wield shall dwell in this hall;  
 This grant I you, ministers, mine,  
 While steadfast in thought ye remain;  
 And also all them that are nought  
 Shall pine in hell-prison in pain.  
 Of all mights I have made most near after me,  
 I make thee as master and mirror of my might;  
 I set thee here by me in bliss for to be,  
 And name thee now, Lucifer, as bearer of light.  
 Nought here shall make thee to fear;  
 In this bliss shall your dwelling remain;  
 All wealth in your wielding retain,  
 The while due obedience you bear.

*Then the angels sing: Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus, Domine deus Sabaoth.*

1 Angel Seraphyn Ah, merciful maker, full mickle is thy might,  
 That all this world at a word worthily hast wrought.  
 Aye loved be that lovely lord his light,  
 That thus us mighty has made, who now were right nought.  
 In bliss for to bide in his blessing,  
 Everlasting in love let us lout him,  
 Who sets us thus closely about him,  
 Of mirth nevermore to have missing.

1 Angel Lucifer All the mirth that is made is marked in me.  
 The beams of my brilliance are burning so bright,  
 And so seemly in sight myself I now see.  
 Like a lord am I lifted to dwell in this light.  
 More fairer by far I appear;  
 In me is no point to impair;  
 I feel me well favoured and fair;  
 My power is passing my peers.

1 Angel Cherybyn Lord, with a lasting love we love thee alone,  
 You mightiful maker that marked us and made us,  
 And wrought us thus worthily to dwell as thy own  
 Where never feeling of filth may foul us nor fade us.  
 All bliss is here biding about us,  
 The while we are stable of thought  
 In the worship of him that us wrought;  
 Of dread need we never more doubt us.

1 Angel Lucifer Oh what!  
 I am favoured and fair and figured full fit;  
 The form of all fairness upon me is fast.  
 All wealth I am wielding, so wise is my wit;

The beams of my brightness are built with the best.  
 My showing is shimmering and shining,  
 So bigly to bliss am I brought;  
 I need to annoy me right nought;  
 Here shall never pain bring me pining.

Angel Seraphim With all the wit that we wield we worship they will,  
 Thou glorious God that is ground of all grace.  
 Aye with steadfast sound let us stand still,  
 Lord, to be fed with the food of thy fair face.  
 In life that is truly aye-lasting,  
 Thy dole, Lord is aye daintily dealing;  
 And whoso that food may be feeling,  
 To see thy fair face, is not fasting.

1 Angel Lucifer Oh sure, what!

I am worthily wrought with worship, I wis;  
 For in a glorious glee my glittering it gleams.  
 I am so mightily made my mirth may not miss;  
 Aye shall I bide in this bliss thought brightness of beams.  
 I need no annoyance to name;  
 All wealth at my will am I wielding;  
 Above all yet shall I dwell in fame,  
 On height in the highest of heaven.  
 There shall I set myself, full seemly to sight,  
 To receive my reverence through right of renown.  
 I shall be like unto him that is highest on height!  
 Oh what! I am perfect and proud...  
 Out, deuce! All goes down!  
 My might and my main are all marring.  
 Help, fellows! In faith, I am falling.

2 Fallen Angel From heaven we are hurled down on all hand.  
 To woe we wending, I warrant.

Lucifer the Devil Out, out!

Haro, helpless! So hot is it here.  
 This is a dungeon of dole in which I am dight.  
 Where are my kin now, so comely and clear?  
 Now am I loathliest, alas, that ere was so light.  
 My brightness is blackest of hue now;  
 My bale is aye beating and burning,  
 That makes me go griding and grinning.  
 Out, ay welaway!  
 I wallow enough in woe now.

2 Devil Out, out!

I go mad for woe; my wits are all spent now.  
 All our food is but filth; we swelter in scorn.

We that were builded in bliss, in bale are we burnt now.  
 Out on thee, Lucifer, lurdan! Our light has thou lorn.  
 Thy deeds to this dole now have drawn us;  
 To spoil us thou hast been our speeder,  
 For thou wast our light and our leader,  
 Who highest in heaven had called us.

Lucifer Welaway!

Woe is me now; now is it worse than it was.  
 Uncomfortless carp ye; I said but a thought.

2 Devil Yah, ludan! You lost us.

Lucifer Ye lie! Out, alas!

I wist not this woe should be wrought.  
 Out on ye, lurdans; ye smother me in smoke.

2 Devil This woe hast thou wrought us.

Lucifer Ye lie, ye lie!

2 Devil Thou liest, and that shalt abide by.

Here, lurdans; have at ye. Let's look!

Angel Cherubim Ah, Lord,

Loved be thy name, that us this light lent,  
 Since Lucifer our leader is lighted so low,  
 For his disobedience in bale to be burnt,  
 Thy righteousness in right order to show.  
 Each work even as it is wrought  
 Through grace of thy merciful might  
 The cause I see it in sight,  
 Wherefore into bale he is brought.

God These fools from their fairness in fantasies fell,  
 And made nought of might that marked them and made them;  
 Wherefore as their works were in woe shall the dwell;  
 For some are fallen into filth that evermore shall fade them,  
 And never shall have grace for to shade them.  
 So passing of power they thought them,  
 They would not me worship that made them.  
 Wherefore shall my wrath e'er go with them.  
 And all that me worship shall dwell here, I wis.  
 Wherefore in my work go forward I will,  
 Since their might is marred that meant all amiss,  
 Even to mine own figure this bliss to fulfill.  
 Mankind out of mould will I make.  
 But first before him I create  
 All things that shall strengthen his state,  
 To which his own nature shall take.  
 And in my first making to muster my might,

Since earth is vain void and darkness doth dwell,  
 I bid by my blessing the angels give light  
 To the earth, for it faded when fiends fell;  
 In hell never darkness is missing.  
 The darkness thus name I for "night,"  
 And "day" do I call this clear light;  
 My after works soon shall ye know.  
 And now in my blessing, I part them in two,  
 The night from the day, so that they meet never, But each on its course  
 their gates for to go.  
 Both the night and the day, do duly your devoir  
 To all I shall work, without ceasing.  
 This day's work is done every deal,  
 And all this work like me right well,  
 And straightway I give it my blessing.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> J. S. Purvis, *The York Cycle Of Mystery Plays: A Complete Version*. (London: SPCK, 1984), 15-19.

## The Spicers

*Doctor declarens dicta prophetarum de nativitate Christi future, Maria, Angelus salutans eam, Maria salutans Elizabetham.*

Doctor Lord God, great marvel this may mean,  
 How man was made with nought amiss,  
 And set where he should ever have been  
 All without bale, biding in bliss;  
 And how he lost that comfort clean,  
 And was put out from Paradise,  
 And since what sorrows sore were seen,  
 Seen unto him and to all his,  
 And how they lay long space  
 In hell locked from light,  
 Till God granted them grace  
 Of help as he had hight.  
 Then is it needful for to name  
 How prophets could God's counsel tell,  
 As prophet Amos of the same  
 Taught while he in this life did dwell,  
 He saith thus: God the Father in heaven  
 Ordained in earth mankind to mend;  
 And to grace it with godhead even,  
 His Son he said that he should send  
 To take kind of man's kin  
 In a maiden full mild.  
 So was many saved of sin,  
 And the foul fiend beguiled.  
 And that the fiend should be so fed  
 By grief and to no truth take tent,  
 God made that maiden to be wed,  
 Ere He his son unto her sent.  
 So was the Godhead closed and clad  
 In weeds of wedding where they went.  
 And that our bliss should be so bred  
 Full many matters may be meant.  
 The maiden of Israel all new,  
 He says, shall bear one and forth bring,  
 As the lily flower full fair of hue.  
 This meaneth so to old and young  
 That the high Holy Ghost  
 Comes our mischief to mend  
 In Mary maiden chaste,  
 When God his Son would send.

This lady the lily equaling,  
 That is because of her clean life-  
 For in this world was no such thing,  
 One to be maiden, mother and wife;  
 Her son in heaven's realm be king,  
 As oft is read by reason rife;  
 And her husband both master and meek  
 In charity, to stint all strife.  
 This passed all earthly wit,  
 How God ordained them then;  
 In her one to be knit  
 Godhead, maidenhead and man.  
 How St. Luke speaks in his Gospel:  
 "From God in heaven is sent," says he,  
 An angel is named Gabriel,  
 To Nazareth in Galilee,  
 Where then a maiden mild did dwell,  
 That with Joseph should be wedded be;  
 Her name Mary; thus did he tell.  
 God's grace was then arrayed  
 To man in this manner;  
 And how the angel said,  
 Take heed, all that are here.  
*Then the angel sings.*

Gabriel Hail, Mary, full of grace and bliss  
 Our Lord God is with thee,  
 And has chosen thee for his;  
 Of all women blest might thou be.

Mary What manner of hailing is this  
 That privily comes to me?  
 For in my heart a thought it is,  
 The tokening that I here see.

Gabriel Now dread thou nought, thou mild Mary  
 For nothing that may thee befall,  
 For thou hast found all sovereignly  
 Of God a grace over others all.  
 In chastity of thy body  
 Conceive and bear a child thou shall.  
 This bidding bring I thee thereby.  
 His name Jesu shalt thou call.  
 Mickle of might then shall he be,  
 He shall be God and called God's Son,  
 And David's seat, his father free,  
 Shall God give him to sit upon.

As king for ever reign shall he,  
 In Jacob's house aye for to dwell;  
 Of his kingdom and dignity  
 Shall no man earthly know nor tell.  
 Mary O thou God's Angel, meek and mild,  
 How should it be, I do thee pray,  
 That I should so conceive a child  
 Of any man by night or day?  
 I know no man who has defiled  
 My maidenhood, the sooth to say;  
 Without a will of workings wild  
 In chastity have I been aye.  
 Gabriel The Holy Ghost in thee shall light,  
 High virtue shall he to thee hold;  
 The holy birth of thee so bright,  
 The Son of God shall he be called.  
 Lo, Elizabeth thy cousin might  
 No child conceive, for she is old-  
 This is the sixth month now full right  
 With her that barren has been told.  
 Mary Thou angel, blessed messenger,  
 Of God's will do I hold me glad.  
 I love my Lord with heart full dear,  
 For grace that he has on me laid.  
 God's handmaiden, lo, I am here,  
 To do his will all ready arrayed.  
 Be done to me in all manner  
 Through thy word even as though hast said.  
 Gabriel Now God that all our hope is in,  
 Through the might of the Holy Ghost,  
 Save thee, good dame, from stain of sin,  
 And guide thee from all workings waste.

## II

### *The house of Zacharias.*

Mary Elizabeth, mine own cousin,  
 Methought I covet always most,  
 To speak with thee of all my kin  
 Therefore I come thus in this haste.  
 Elizabeth Welcome, thou mild Mary,  
 Mine own cousin so dear;  
 Joyful woman am I  
 That I now see thee here.

Blessed may thou only  
 Of all women appear,  
 And the fruit of thy body  
 Be blessed far and near.  
 This is joyful tiding  
 That I may now here see;  
 The mother of my Lord king  
 In this wise come to me.  
 Soon as the voice of thy hailing  
 Might mine ears enter and be,  
 The child in my womb so young  
 Makes mirth unto thee.

Mary Now, Lord, blest be thou aye,  
 For the grace thou hast me lent.  
 Lord, I love thee, God very  
 For the message thou hast me sent.  
 I thank thee night and day,  
 And pray with good intent  
 I may please thee by my way;  
 To thee my will is bent.

Elizabeth Blest be thou, goodly arrayed  
 To God through chastity.  
 Thou trowed and held thee glad  
 At his will for to be.  
 All that to thee is said  
 From my Lord God so free,  
 Such grace is for thee laid  
 To be fulfilled in thee.

Mary To his grace I will me betake,  
 With chastity to deal,  
 That made me thus to go  
 Among his maidens well.  
 My soul shall loving make  
 Unto that Lord so leal;  
 My spirit make joy also  
 And my spirit make joy also  
 In God that is my weal.  
*Then she sings the Magnificat.*<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> J. S. Purvis, *The York Cycle Of Mystery Plays: A Complete Version*. (London: SPCK, 1984), 79-85.



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