The York Cycle at the University of Toronto

The *Poculi Ludique Societas*, the medieval drama group attached to the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto, in association with Records of Early English Drama plans to present the York Cycle of Mystery Plays on the Toronto campus in the fall of 1977. During the weekend of 1 October, the entire extant cycle of 48 plays will be performed on pageant wagons in a 'station-to-station' presentation, taking a roughly circular route through the heart of the University campus. On the open area bounded by the wagon route, a medieval fair will be held, with food and craft stalls, strolling entertainers, and so on. The fair will, we hope, provide spectators and performers alike with at least a taste of the atmosphere of festival and celebration in which the York Cycle took place annually from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. It will also serve the function of giving audiences a chance to take part in other activities from time to time, should they feel momentarily saturated with the plays themselves.

The plan to present all 48 plays in a single production — the first time such a presentation will have been done anywhere since the suppression of the cycle in the latter part of the sixteenth century — received its initial impetus from three sources. The first was the desire of both the PLS and the Executive Editor of REED to mount a really substantial dramatic presentation as their first collaborative practical research project. The second was the feeling that, since REED's first published edition would be that of the records from York, a production utilizing the findings of up-to-the-minute research on the York records and plays would be most appropriate. And last, but by no means least, was the success of the pioneering University of Leeds' production of the York plays on wagons in the summer of 1975.

As at Leeds, and for much the same reasons, many different university and city drama societies have been approached with a view to their staging one of the plays from the cycle. Such a collaborative production will enable us to draw on a multiplicity of people and resources, and will also, we hope, provide the closest possible modern equivalent to a medieval trade guild performance structure. With the exception of the PLS itself and the Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama, who will produce about three plays as special research projects, each group involved in the production will present only one play, thus exhibiting a variety, entirely appropriate, of approaches within a coherent overall production technique and style that will be carefully coordinated and overseen by REED and members of the PLS. Help during planning and rehearsal stages will be given to participating groups, assistance ranging from the provision of basic factual data relevant to the original production of a particular play, to advice on costuming style and the iconography of properties and settings.
When the first details of the project were being worked out, a simple logistical study, balancing resources in terms of wagons and production personnel against a desire to give the presentation a true station-to-station feeling, convinced us that three performance stations was an optimum number for our purposes. Two stations would hardly have given an adequate impression of the station-to-station technique. On the other hand, as recent studies have shown, with a multiplicity of stations a back-up effect must occur. No great problem even over twelve or more stations when each guild had its own wagon, it would have become an insuperable problem for us, using a limited number of wagons and ‘recycling’ them. Our calculations convinced us that if we used three performance stations and eight wagons, we would be able to change wagons, sets, and casts with reasonable efficiency, yet still preserve the essential elements of the station-to-station form for our performance and research needs.

Once this had been decided, the desirability of permanently acquiring at least some of the wagons that would eventually be required was discussed and agreed upon. One of REED’s main objectives in co-sponsoring the production was research into the practical implications of material from the York records. We therefore felt that we should attempt to reconstruct as accurately as possible some of the different forms of wagon stages apparently demanded by particular plays. This reconstruction, of course, would not have been possible working with borrowed wagons on short-term loan only, as was done at Leeds. A thorough investigation of some of the implications of stage-spectacle of a number of the playtexts and records demanded major structural alterations to a standard wagon. We decided, therefore, that five suitable farm wagons, or wagon beds, should be purchased. The other three wagons would be borrowed for the occasion, and used for plays requiring simpler forms of staging.

Five wagons have now been acquired by PLS/REED and will be repaired and reconstructed during the summer of 1977, and as much as possible of current theory based on the York records and playtexts will be tested against the practical necessities emerging from the process of construction and of rehearsal and performance on the rebuilt wagon stages. In this way, we hope, fresh insights may be provided into the staging of such plays as the Mercers’ Play of The Last Judgment.

The Leeds production of a major part of the York Cycle on pageant wagons in 1975 has given us many ideas and a high level of achievement at which to aim. It has also shown just how practical the station-to-station wagon presentation of the plays really is. We hope that the production of the full cycle and the more detailed reconstruction of some of the individual wagon-stages in Toronto will finally remove some of the doubts that have recently been expressed as to the practicability and effectiveness of this method of presentation as it was used in medieval York.

Anyone desiring further information about the production should contact either David Parry, P.L.S., c/o Centre for Medieval Studies, 39 Queen’s Park Crescent East, Toronto, M5S 2C3 or Records of Early English Drama, 85 Charles Street West, Toronto, M5S 1K5.