

“I WOLDE LOKE BOTH FERRE AND NERE:”
SEARCHING, TRAVELING, AND “TELLING” THE WORLD IN THE YORK CORPUS
CHRISTI PLAYS

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In *The Appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene*, Mary tells Jesus that she would “loke both ferre and nere / To fynde my Lorde.”¹ Dramatic irony works within this scene to communicate a complex tenet of medieval Christianity: the majority of the audience knows that the gardener Mary meets is Jesus in disguise, and they know that Mary will not find the body of Jesus because he has risen. However, there is another level of irony at work here. While spectators of the play will indeed see actors *portraying* Jesus, they will, like Mary, “se hym nocht.” The actor’s insistence that Jesus is absent effaces his dramatic representations of the character. Through the deployment of this dramatic and verbal irony, the staging of the York plays situates the act of seeking the divine in the material world as a gesture parallel to Mary seeking the Christ in his physical body. Essentially, the searcher who looks for salvation in the material world is looking in the wrong place. This gesture of seeking the divine in the mundane comprises a theme which is carried throughout the play cycle; from Christ’s Crucifixion, Mary’s search for Jesus’s body, and the end of the world featured in *Doomsday*, the plays repeatedly insist that the physical act of seeking the body of Christ is an imperfect metaphor for seeking spiritual salvation, and this mistake is one with dire spiritual consequences.

Perhaps most importantly, this metaphor also works upon the whole of the play cycle. The audiences of the plays are themselves engaged in a sort of seeking when they view the action upon the pageants, and this action of viewing, I argue, is intended to complicate the boundary between the action of the plays and the actual, spiritual salvation they intend to enact. Mary’s search for the body of Christ and Jesus’s subsequent admonition reminds the audience that the act of seeking is a spiritual rather than physical act. But how is Christ’s admonition to

¹Davidson, *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, 39: 34.

Mary extended toward the audience as a whole? How is the act of seeking Christ borne out in the structure of the York Corpus Christi Play Cycle and its use of the ludic space of York itself?

Of special significance here is the role of the audience members as active seekers, the city as the location of seeking, and the city-dwellers as players in an action of seeking that paradoxically reveals in the act of disguising. While this collapsed narrative of time and space has been explored by theatre historians in the past, what I would like to add is an expanded exploration of the city as ludic space which situates the York Corpus Christi plays as a blended form of literature: the play cycle itself is a blend of oral and visual media that is nevertheless textual in nature. Using theatrical props, dialogue, and processional motion, the plays provide a dramatized map of history, time, and cosmology. Its dramatic form suggests its role as teaching tool to the people of York, and its spatial organization suggests that it comprises a sort of dramatized cosmography. The plays were performed each year in the city of York, and this repetition, too, provides a key to understanding the larger spiritual significance they provide. They are a repetition-based teaching tool, one which relies on the ludic space of the city, the processional movement of the pageant wagons, and direct address to the audience to communicate their meaning. These pedagogical techniques can also be found in other didactic forms of literature of the age: I argue that, based on these spatial and performative features, the plays comprise a sort of dramatic *rotae*, or memory device.

Through the spatial organization and the cyclic motion of the plays as they progress through the city of York and across the audiences' fields of vision, the logistical and practical nature of the plays themselves dramatically represent a historical "atlas" and cosmology of the medieval world that explores and reinforces this central searching theme of *quem quaeritis*, the historical trope at the heart of medieval drama. At the same time, they attempt to negotiate and

articulate the place of the material within the greater scheme of that which is eternal. This procedure of portrayal, articulation, and negotiation is a complex task which involves the utilization of the city as ludic space, citizens as actor/ characters, and cyclic movement of the pageant wagons as metaphor. Taken together as a unified logic of the plays, these factors comprise a network of metaphors which work upon the audience member at a basic level to situate the act of engaging cognitively with the plays as a mirror action to seeking salvation embodied in Jesus's dramatized and spiritual sacrifice.

It is important to note the special role that human cognition plays in the audience's viewing of the plays, specifically as the plays traverse their cyclical path through the city. The organization of the plays spatially capitalizes on established learning and memorization techniques utilized by Medieval scholars, passed down since antiquity, and mobilized in other didactic media such as *rotae*, T-O maps, volvelles, and cosmographies. These organizational strategies are particularly effective pedagogical techniques because they structure the content they present in ways that mirror cognitive processes that the human brain naturally engages in to make and structure the meaning of sensory input in relation to embodied experience. What makes the plays uniquely effective is their projection of these spatial cognitive techniques upon the larger plane of the city of York as ludic space. The cognitive processes that are engaged when viewing and making sense of *rotae* or volvelles are appropriated and used in tandem with the cognitive processes mobilized in the act of theatre spectatorship to communicate the complex and important lesson of the scriptures to an audience possessing a wide variety of literacies. To best understand this, it may be useful to begin with a discussion of maps and diagrams and the cognitive processes embedded in their spatial organization.

Maps as Conceptual Diagrams

On the Mappa Mundi, located at the Hereford Cathedral, the known world is represented as a disc, surrounded on the inside by a ring that contains the winds and circumscribed by an exterior ring of the heavens that enclose it with a scene of the Last Judgement. The map provides a non-linear representation of world history as situated within the empyrean of the heavenly, a graphic rendering of medieval cosmology that sees the earthly realm as the innermost center of a heavenly hierarchy. In terms of geographic navigation, the map would serve little practical use; continental shapes are inflated and distorted, oceans diminished, and shorelines are smoothed beyond recognition. Yet the map *was* intended as a guide for the viewer. It shows the relative location of places such as Jerusalem and Paris, giving the viewer a very general sense of their location in relation to such great cities. It also shows the location of places of religious and mythical significance, such as the Exodus near the Red Sea and the location of the Golden Fleece. Additionally, the map provides the reader with a general sense of cosmography: it displays the entirety of the known world as circumscribed within the sphere of heaven. Christ sits in a scene of Judgement Day, separating the good souls from the bad. Naomi Kline argues that “[t]he primary function of medieval maps was to provide illustrated histories or moralized, didactic displays in a geographic setting.”² In this sense, the Hereford map provides a guide for the mental or spiritual navigation of the soul through the text and history of the Bible and toward the final moment of the Last Judgement.

Perhaps most significant for my current study of the York Corpus Christi plays, the map presents the entirety of world history, encompassing the Seven Ages of the World, a Christian concept of periodization deriving from Augustine of Hippo. Visually resisting to portray events

² Naomi Reed Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm*, Reprinted in paperback (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2003), 1.

of Biblical and mythological history in a linear fashion, the map nevertheless presents its history as one with a clear ending point. The conception of human history as having an ultimate end positions the lived experiences of viewers as actors in the drama of human history, whose actions carry implications of a cosmologically permanent nature. The enclosed disc of the earth is a conceptual gesture as well as a practical one. The concentric rings dividing the heavens from the earth serve as a container for the storage and reference of historical information which gives the impression of telling a cohesive story.³

The use of circular graphic representations of earth, cosmography, and other scientific concepts has its roots in monastic didactic literature that used circles as shorthand devices—*rotae*—for assisted learning and memory.⁴ As Kline argues, “[t]he Hereford, Ebstorf, and Psalter maps...functioned not only as cartographic documents but also as family members of the much larger category of cosmological *rotae*.”⁵ To read these medieval maps or *rotae* employs visual methods of situating content and figuring concepts into spatially-organized zones: the circle’s “center, radii, diameters, and perimeters function as the stage upon which a geographical theater-in-the-round presents itself.”⁶ In essence, complicated scientific or doctrinal concepts may be essentialized to aid understanding and memory as well as to facilitate teaching these concepts to students. Education using *rotae* was largely the purview of religious scholars, but their use did extend into the realm of the vernacular.⁷ These cosmological wheels—useful for teaching

³ Ibid., 12. Kline argues that “world maps of the Middle Ages, known as *mappae mundi*...contained the image of the world within such a circular ring, [and] became conceptual enclosures for stored information relating to all of creation.”

⁴ Ibid., 12-13

⁵ Ibid., 12

⁶ Ibid., 3-4

⁷ Ibid., 25. Kline argues that *rotae* “continued to be found in Latin manuscripts that were largely the province of the religious and scholastics of the universities, and extended into manuscripts that contained texts in both Latin and the vernacular.” A notable example is Gauthier of Metz’s *La Romaunce del ymage du monde*, “an encyclopedia of miscellaneous moral and scientific lore.”

monastic students the concepts essential to their craft—were adapted for vernacular literature and, eventually, for inclusion in recreational texts, indicating that some recreational literature did have a didactic dimension.⁸ However, even vernacular texts require literacy to decode. *Rotae* and cosmographical diagrams represent a way of teaching concepts that does not require a student to be proficient in reading and decoding texts.

Though these diagrams would largely have been used for literate scholars and students, adapting them for viewing by the general public was one way to reach a larger, semi-literate or illiterate audience. As Brian Stock argues, literacy of the Middle Ages was a complex designation. Broadly speaking, medieval culture in England was highly textual, though many members of society's lower echelons were not literate in the technical sense of the word. The Middle Ages did not see the written word fully supplant oral tradition, but the eleventh and twelfth centuries saw an interdependence between the written and spoken tradition.⁹ In Stock's terms, "oral discourse effectively began to function within a universe of communications governed by texts."¹⁰ In this culture of textuality, maps and *rotae* served a didactic role for the visual communication of written scientific and doctrinal concepts. Manuscripts, whether in vulgate or vernacular, were generally inaccessible to the general populace. The Hereford map, and other maps and *rotae* like it, can be seen as church doctrine *in* decoration. This made texts visible, publicly available, and legible.

Evidence for the pervasiveness of *rotae* as organizing conceptual structures is also found in medieval drama. The York Corpus Christi Plays make use of the roughly circular containment

⁸ Ibid., 25-27: "Apparently the cosmological wheels once limited to monastic and clerical usage were transformed and adapted to accompany the more readily accessible vernacular works that were becoming increasingly available to clerics and lay people alike."

⁹ Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

of the city walls of York in a gesture which positions the city as a real, 3-dimensional *rota*. Like the Hereford map, the play cycle of the city depicted the religious history of the known world in a spherical space circumscribed by the very walls of the city to demonstrate containment and unity. Unlike the Hereford and similar maps, the York plays involve the passing of real time, as well as the linear progression of stories, to organize and replicate on a local scale. The specific time and space of the plays' production is designed to appear as a microcosm of all of time and the organization of the cosmos as known in the medieval period. The plays converge both time and space upon the audience participant, who fulfills the paradoxical role of being both detached from the action, while at the same time a willing participant in biblical events. This collapsing of time and place situates the city of York as a *theatrum mundi* and its city-dwellers as existing (if only for a day) in a city whose walls encompass the entire world and the entire expanse of known time.

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Many medieval maps, designed to encompass concepts of time as well as space, “portray the course of universal history together with totality of historical space.”¹¹ In this sense, the play cycle as a representation of a medieval map follows medieval cartographic conventions in its facilitation of the audience’s spatialized and chronological organization of events, people, concepts, and the cosmos.¹² The practical and logistical elements of the theatrical production itself work together to present a visual atlas and cosmography of medieval space and time. Using the logics of theatrical space articulated by Bruce McConachie as well as Martin Stevens’s analysis of the medieval “stage” as *theatrum mundi*, I argue that the spatial logic of the plays serves to highlight the separation, present in the medieval view of heaven and earth, between the constant motion of the material world and the eternity of the heavens. In effect, the processional motion of the plays across the stationary position of the audience members mirrors and reinforces the medieval conceptions of time and space in the heavenly and earthly spheres. The spatial logic of the plays, then, can be interpreted as a dramatic articulation of time and space on heaven and earth as well as a didactic tool intended to instruct the audience on negotiating their eternal souls between the two spheres. In terms of theatrical performance, many of the same cognitive organizational techniques (linearity, containment, hierarchy) are deployed in dramatic productions to ensure that most theater-goers, generally without regard to literacy level, comprehend the action on the stage.

¹¹ Evelyn Edson, *Mapping Time and Space: How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed Their World*, The British Library Studies in Map History, v. 1 (London: British Library, 1997), viii.

¹² Edson, *Mapping Time and Space*, 14-15.

General Cognition in Performance and Instruction

As with maps and diagrams, human cognition is also a crucial element of theatrical performance, and studies in general cognition have demonstrated that theatergoing is an active, rather than passive, activity. Playwrights activate audience members' pre-existing models of behavior, and they may use these pre-existing models to effect social or cultural change through re-presentation. In turn, audience members create their understanding of textual meanings by subconsciously activating, rearranging, and applying what they already know about the world. The ability to internally model other humans' behavior is fundamentally and evolutionarily hard-wired into our mental topology, providing humans with the ability to represent visuomotor input and engage in empathy. In essence, this predilection toward empathy allows dramatic spectators to be natural "mind-readers" of actor/ characters; spectators can discern their beliefs, intentions, and emotions simply by watching them.¹³ Of course, each individual has a unique response to their theatergoing experience, but societal and cultural literacies work within a dramatic performance to ensure that the majority of spectators in an audience will react to the characters and actions on a stage with some degree of unanimity. This general consensus, based on emotional contagion and a shared cultural literacy, ensures that medieval audiences would react to characters and plot elements with relative unity.

The basis of our understanding is the "cognitive universal"—these units interact to form basic concepts by which humans make sense of the world. Structural necessities like up and down, time interval, and hierarchy work with a playgoer's natural proclivities toward empathy and emotional contagion to participate in the meaning-making necessary to engage with dramatic

¹³ Bruce A. McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 65.

production. These processes function at the automatic level and assist us in making sense of the world from the time we are born. We also—both unconsciously and purposefully—utilize these base-level concepts when we try to help others make sense of concepts. Medieval scholars and authors used basic shapes, proportions, and relationships when converting the physical into the abstract (as in the case of T-O and other medieval maps), and they also used these foundational structures when illustrating complex concepts and medieval cosmography. In some cases, as in the Mappa Mundi at the Hereford Cathedral, these purposes are blended.

As Bruce McConachie demonstrates, the topology of the human brain constructs understanding based on simple concepts and schema (McConachie’s “universal primitives”) which, in turn, play a role in more complex and culturally-oriented understanding of a dramatic performance. Applying basic concepts of this neurological topology to practical elements and effects such as directional motion, temporality, and dialogue used in the York Cycle, the experience of theatre-going is used to imitate for the audience members the spiritual act of seeking Christ and salvation, while the city of York as *theatrum mundi* engages in a metaphorical transference positioning the city to be used as a *rota* for the journey toward salvation.

It is important to note at this point that, even if a medieval city-dweller *could* read the Bible in Latin, the act of spectating in the theatre is fundamentally different from the act of reading. Because the engagement occurs not between text and person, but between living participants in close proximity of space, place, and time, “theatre usually has more in common with face-to-face conversations than do other mediated events such as viewing films or websites.”¹⁴ The York Corpus Christi cycle exploits this difference at the same time as it attempts to engage citizens in the resurrection across a large span of ages and education levels.

¹⁴ Bruce A. McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, 1.

The plays achieve this goal through the skillful use of what McConachie calls “cognitive universals.” The visual representations of the plays resonate with the audience members based on their cognition of these cognitive universals, and the play’s usage of city as ludic space situates the conflict of the plays’ action within both the immediate present and the expanse of monumental time. It is through this blending of time and space, as well as through the manipulation of cognitive behaviors, that the play cycle provides a complex spiritual, geographic, and historical education to engaged audience members.

Cognitive science suggests that organizing remembered visual input into basic abstractions (“concepts”) begins at an early age in humans. Such early concepts include notions of color, direction, hierarchy, and time interval.¹⁵ Neuroscientists term these “universals” because they appear to underlie all images the brain constructs.¹⁶ Further, these cognitive universals arise fundamentally from our embodied experience. Spatial relations such as containment, forward vs. backward, outside vs. inside, and source-path-goal are developed in infancy and, patterned over time, form the basis for language, culture, and practical metaphors.¹⁷ It is no coincidence, then, that conceptual diagrams such as *rotae* and T-O maps take the shape of hierarchies, circles, and continua. These represent concepts visually along the same patterns that the mind would appear to construct them. Specific cultural contexts extend and specify cognitive universals into webs or schemas that shape culturally-appropriate beliefs, ethics, and historical practices. Interestingly, the York dramas, as well as other maps, visual histories, and psalters, utilize the these same spatial “primitives” to represent the positioning of earth within the heavens, the linear directionality of time, the history of the earth, and the path to salvation at the

¹⁵ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences*, 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

end of days. Such spatial relations can be seen to be firmly entrenched and effectively utilized within the York cycle to reinforce specific cultural meanings, notably the doctrine and history of the Christian faith.

Of historical and literary significance here are the ways by which the Corpus Christi play cycle manipulates these conceptual universals as they portray significant and complex elements of Christian doctrine and reflect medieval beliefs about the structure of the universe and its time. At a basic level, time and space are not easily divorceable in terms of the plays, partially because space is used as a metaphor for demonstrating time as well as place. Broadly speaking, the York plays use the cognitive universal of containment in order to communicate the complexity of the cosmography they endeavor to portray. As the walled city of York provides the practical and contained ludic space of the play cycle, the space also provides a simulation or a representation of two other containments: the entire span of known time as well as the known world. This overlapping or palimpsest of space-over-space and time-over-time is a central element of an overall theme and message for the plays, as it situates the act of seeking salvation within a broader and more significant space. It also preserves the conceptual unity, linearity, and finality of *rotae* and maps such as the one at Hereford.

In this superimposition of space, the walled city takes on a logic of space which correlates with the medieval concept of world geography as it was illustrated in maps at the time. Martin Stevens points to the Hereford Map as a notable example of the medieval understanding of world geography, particularly as it was situated in the cosmology of the known universe. In examples such as the Hereford, Sawley, and Psalter maps, the known world is portrayed as a disk, typically with the walled city of Jerusalem at its center. Martin argues that the city of York as ludic space was a theater in the round, “a stage that replicated the world,” “grounded in a

theological, mythical, and historical reading of the world.”¹⁸ Of particular significance here is that, on the Hereford, Sawley, and Psalter maps, Jesus and his angels are depicted as outside of the bounded geographic space of the Earth. Evelyn Edson characterizes such medieval maps as attempting

to reconcile a Christian theological view of the world with the hard facts of reality. This project involved placing the earth in both its cosmic and historical contexts. In the cosmic view, the earth was at the centre of the universe and also its lowest point, surrounded by spheres of increasing light and purity as one ascended to the heaven of angels and the presence of God himself.¹⁹

In terms of cognitive science, this representation of the world utilizes the cognitive universal of containment to elucidate two separate spheres: the worldly and the spiritual. It also suggests the degree of finality denoted by the Last Judgement. By engaging this structure of containment, medieval maps and the York plays both suggest the ephemeral nature of human history. It is represented as paradoxically both significant and transient. It is minute, in comparison, to the awesome power of God while also being comprised of momentous occasions signaling mankind’s linear progression toward Judgement.

Like the York Corpus Christi plays, these early “atlases” adhere to a vision of the earth and cosmography that blends the sparse representations of world geography and cosmography present in the Bible with graphic representations of the known inhabited world. Specifically, medieval cartographers situate the disc of the earthly sphere as separate and contained within the heavenly spheres, and medieval maps and atlases contain varying layers between heaven and

¹⁸ John A. Alford, ed., *From Page to Performance: Essays in Early English Drama* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 20.

¹⁹ Edson, *Mapping Time and Space*, 163.

earth to represent oceans, winds, and stars. The maps possess detailed illustrated backgrounds which situate earth as within the heavens using the same spatial contours illustrated by the dialogue of the plays:

The water I will be set
To flowe both fare and nere,
And than the firmament
In mydis to set thame sere.” (I: 37-40)

Comparing this selection of lines to both the Psalter and Hereford maps produces a nearly identical spatial representation to the production of the plays within the walled city itself, its stone walls circumscribing the city within the firmament.

The York plays build upon the cognitive universal of containment in order to instruct the audience in the historical/ cartographic tradition that situates the heavens as existing outside of the realm of Earth but nevertheless accessible to the individual after death. The accessibility of this realm is the subject of the plays themselves, but the process of the Last Judgement is a dominating feature of some medieval maps as well, most notably the Hereford. The plays and the atlases utilize the universal concepts of containment to represent the world as separate from and lower than the heavenly realm, and the source-path-goal universal concept models the spiritual search for salvation as a path toward the goal that is to be realized at the end of days: when Jesus breaches the containment of the earth, dissolves the boundaries between the divine and earthly, and determines whether one may gain entrance into the heavenly realm:

Ther schall thei see the woundes five
That my Sone suffered for them all.
And sounderes thame before my sight,

All same in blisse schall thei not be.
Mi blissid childre, as I have hight,
On my right hande I schall thame see.
Sethen schall ilke a weried wight
On my lifte side for ferdnesse flee. (47: 71-78).

The significance of these lines is their demonstration and reinforcement of both scripture and prevalent concepts cosmography. What little staging information exists about the individual pageant wagons gives insight to the similarities between this scene and the one that crowns the Hereford map. At the top of the world disc of the Hereford map, Jesus sits enthroned in a scene of the Last Judgement. In a graphic representation strikingly similar to that in the York play, his wounds actively bleed as the souls are divided between those destined for Hell or Heaven. Of significance here is Jesus's enthronement *outside* of the containment of the Earth. In medieval maps and cosmographies, Jesus sits atop the Earth in a gesture which underscores his placement in the divine sphere.

This action is carried over into the Corpus Christi plays by their insistence that Jesus is not present on the stage despite the presence of an actor representing him. Audience members, seated at various stations in the city, watch the procession of pageant wagons across their field of vision. In the plays featuring Jesus as a main character, his presence is often accompanied by dialogue that is specifically intended to paradoxically efface the actors' role as Jesus as well as underscore the message he presents, and the dialogue in several of the plays is likely intended as a direct address to the audience. These factors work together to situate the playgoer as an actor herself, engaged—like Mary—in a search for the divine, yet paradoxically removed from the action in order to witness each of the Seven Ages.

The City as Ludic Space

The focus of the play on seeking is facilitated by the physical place of York as the setting for the play cycle. Placing all of the known world and all of known time upon the city of York is a sort of metaphorical transference, underscoring the theme of seeking that is important in the resurrection sequence of the play cycle. In evoking the view of the cosmos presented in medieval cartography, the plays situate audience members in a microcosm of the earthly sphere. As the plays progress across the audience's field of vision, they suggest through dialogue that the earthly sphere may be transcended through Jesus Christ but insist upon the spirituality (rather than the physicality) of this search. In addition to space, the York plays make use of medieval concepts of temporality and the cognitive universal of source-path-goal in their progression of plays. Beginning at Trinity Priory near Micklegate, the plays progress in an incomplete circle around the city, finishing the sequence at the Pavement near South Colliergate. The circular movement of the plays has logical as well as metaphorical significance. Logically, it makes sense to move the plays around the city and reach as many audiences as possible. However, the cyclic nature of the procession also serves to activate basic cognitive models with which to understand the study of history (source-path-goal) as well as to educate and underscore some central elements of medieval cosmology.

The plays, moving around the central axis of the city but stopping short of coming full-circle, create a visual image of a linear chronologic movement that corresponds to the scale of time presented in the Bible, beginning in Genesis with *The Creation of the Angels and the Fall of Lucifer*, reaching a climax during the resurrection plays, and concluding with the inevitable future event of *Doomsday*, the Last Judgement. Like the geographic division of heaven and earth presented on period maps, the processional motion of the plays before a stationary audience

reinforces the division between heavenly and earthly time as it provides a representation of time that is linear in nature. This linear representation, concluding with the Last Judgement, reinforces a sense of urgency for the action of seeking salvation. In effect, the motion of the plays across the stationary vantage point function as a sort of timepiece counting down to a final moment of Judgement, the breaching of the container of earthly space and time into the heavenly. Edson's overview of the Hereford map is illustrative of the way the York Cycle functions as a dramatic and didactic tool for mapping medieval cosmology: "The Hereford map shows plainly...the image of the world framed by the divine cycle of creation and judgement. As events unrolled down the map...the Christian was instructed in the meaning of history."²⁰ These events, rather than proceeding linearly down the map, process across the field of vision as if they were scenes on a ticking timepiece.

Playgoing as "Seeking"

Like the viewer of the Hereford map, the audience member would witness the whole of human history, bookended by the Creation and the Last Judgement. However, observing the motion from a stationary vantage point, the viewer may feel temporally disconnected from the action of the pageants even while certain plays evoke them as a participant in actions of the plays. Like the superimposition of the world over the city of York, the two concepts of time do not vie for prominence; they coexist in such a way as to underscore the importance and significance of the individual and the individual's soul in salvation. In this way, the York plays situate the locus of the passion, resurrection, and salvation upon the viewer, the sole stationary point in the play cycle. The viewer is, in fact, an actor herself in the drama of the divine even as, in her role of spectator, she is seeker of divine truth.

²⁰ Edson, *Mapping Time and Space*, 144.

The plays also encourage the spectator to take a more active role than simply viewing and attending to the action of the play—further even than seeking redemption in Christ. The containment of the plays within the walled city suggests a collective element of the process of salvation. It is not simply enough to have a personal relationship with God. In his address to the Apostles and souls in *The Last Judgement*, for instance, Christ outlines two additional general indicators for virtuous behavior. For the good souls, Christ stresses the role of charity and good deeds, echoing the line from the Last Judgement scene of Matthew: "Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me."²¹ In *Doomsday*, the character of Jesus reinforces the point:

That you is dight for youre goode dede
Full blithe may ye be where ye stande
For mekill in hevne schall be youre mede.²²

This scene, effectively providing the encapsulation of the narrative in the gesture of closure, emphasizes to the audience the role of good deeds and charity in their own lives. Though the progression of plays comprises a visual timepiece or timeline, the implication for the spectators is that, unlike the *anima mala*, their time for salvation has not yet elapsed. There is still time to repent and to engage in charitable acts that will put them on the side of the "right" when the true day of judgment arrives. Even as the action of the plays occurs within the Seventh Age, the character of Jesus re-orientes the playgoers' foci toward their own Sixth Age—the Age in which they can enact their own salvation in preparation for the events of the Seventh.

²¹ Robert P. Carroll and Stephen Prickett, eds., *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, Reissued as paperback, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), Mat. 25:40-45

²² Davidson, *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, 47:282-284.

Earlier, in *the Appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalen*, Mary epitomizes the Christian who seeks Christ. In this scene, a metaphoric transference takes place in which Mary's search for the body of Christ mimics the audience's spiritual search for salvation. Jesus's rebuke to Mary that she is looking in the wrong place is applied to the spectators' action of attending to play as well as to the spiritual search for Christ in the mundane world. Extending this metaphor, Christ also commands Mary (and the audience) to speak the word of the gospel to others. Paradoxically, as the audience is intended to assume the role of Mary Magdalen by realizing the mistake of looking for redemption in the physical world, Jesus also suggests that the process of salvation nevertheless begins in the physical world with the stories that the play cycle has been relating. Attending to the plays is only the material and embodied beginning of a process, the end of which is spiritual. This shape, too, mimics that of the actual play cycle: the biblical events which transpired in the earthly realm reach their culmination in the translation of the material body into the soul in heaven.

When Jesus addresses his apostles in *The Last Judgement*, he also suggests the role of evangelizing in salvation. After all, people have to hear the gospel in order to believe and follow it. When Jesus commands Mary "to Galile' schall thou wende," he instructs her to tell the tale of everything that she has seen.²³ This moment suggests that the audience, in taking the role of Mary Magdalen, is also commanded to "telle thame ilke worde to ende / that thou spake with me here."²⁴ The commandment to evangelize is one that the plays epitomize: they relate biblical stories and guide the soul from the realm of the material toward that of the spiritual. Indeed, they are two components of a process that begins with storytelling and culminate in transcendence of

²³ Davidson, *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, 39: 142.

²⁴ Davidson, *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, 39: 146-147.

the material. In presenting this directive to the audience as well as the other actors, the character of Jesus complicates the boundary between performance and lived experience.

This transposition of actor/ actress with audience may seem at first to be a complex dramatic and rhetorical maneuver. However, as McConachie illustrates, it is an element situated at the very heart of dramatic performance. Spectators naturally project themselves into the emotional situations of actor/ characters on stage; they “simulate the experiences of actor/ characters in their own minds.”²⁵ From birth, humans engage in a process of embodying others’ emotional and mental states. We learn from watching others perform tasks and engage in relationships, embodying actions and responses within our own minds. It is this “insertion” of ourselves into theatre which creates the phenomenon of emotional contagion. McConachie outlines the basic ways that we engage in mirroring activities as pathways to our own learning: we embody others’ emotional behavior, and we produce a mirrored emotional response.²⁶ This embodiment is highly automatic in nature. For the same reason that most of us do not have to think about crying during a sad movie or laughing during a comedy routine, medieval audiences would automatically experience emotional contagion from the character of Mary Magdalen. Provided they were paying attention, they would understand her motives as a character and intuit her emotional response upon arriving at the tomb and finding it empty. Despite the dramatic irony at work here (audiences would likely not experience Mary’s level of incredulity at finding the tomb empty), they would nevertheless mirror her experiences within their own minds. Understanding that doctrine is being illustrated for them, they would know that Mary’s search is fruitless while simultaneously placing themselves in her position. In this way, when Jesus tells Mary that he is risen, he is speaking to the whole audience as if they were the character of Mary.

²⁵ McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, 66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

When Jesus commands her to “telle thame ilke worde to ende,” he issues the commandment to the audience as well.²⁷

The didacticism of the York plays is achieved through a series of cognitive models that function largely at the automatic level. The orientation of the world, its place in the cosmos, and its timespan are demonstrated in the plays as the dramatic performance of a *rota* or *mappa mundi*. This conceptual diagramming facilitates audience understanding of complex Christian doctrine because it provides a simplified spatial arrangement of events and themes that exploits the brain’s natural tendency to organize concepts spatially as sequences, hierarchies, or linear progressions. The plays utilize the walled city as ludic space in a gesture of containment that simplifies and essentializes this history within a space that is familiar and negotiable—they recreate the world in miniature. This gesture effectively reinforces the didactic nature of the plays; by presenting them in a setting that is familiar, they underscore the significance of the narrative to the spectators. Deploying (perhaps inadvertently) the principles of empathy, simulation, and emotional contagion, the playwrights of the York Cycle situate the action of searching within each individual spectator.

The faculties of the mind/ brain are easily able to surmount the apparent paradoxes presented by materially embodying the spiritual search because it is in precisely this action of emotional and cognitive embodiment which drives empathy and facilitates the emotions that the plays seek to activate. Engaging in the process of metaphoric transference, the audience member is not a passive spectator; she is the querent of the *quem quaeritis* theme. The progression of the plays across her field of vision makes her a traveler of the known world, exploring the events as well as the places of the Bible. Witnessing deeds both fair and foul, she is reminded by Christ’s

²⁷ Davidson, *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, 39: 146-147.

crucifixion and resurrection that the material world is the locus of human action, the plain upon which the events of the scripture first took place. It may likewise be the plain upon which her own spiritual experiences occur. However, as with Mary Magdalene, she will be reminded that her quest is ultimately a spiritual one.

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