Staging Corpus Christi: The Eucharistic and Cyclic Aesthetics of the York Cycle and Pearl

A DISSERTATION

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Staging Corpus Christi: The Eucharistic and Cyclic Aesthetics of the York Cycle and *Pearl*

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Over the past fifty years, a handful of studies have looked at the influence of Eucharistic piety on the York Cycle and the Middle-English poem *Pearl*. In the most important such study on the York Cycle to date, Pamela King has argued that the plays of the York Cycle have a liturgical principle of selection, a thesis founded on the late medieval liturgical calendar’s correlations to the choice and arrangement of plays in British Library Additional MS 35290. Nonetheless, there remains some doubt about precisely how the York Cycle constituted, to quote King, a “customised celebration” of Corpus Christi. Would the typical audience in late medieval York have been familiar enough with the intricacies of the liturgical calendar to perceive a connection between the plays’ narrative arc and the feast which they ostensibly commemorated? Is it possible that the York Cycle’s celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi might thus have been expressed through the plays’ staging?

While the debate about the York Cycle’s Eucharistic allusions continues even today, the debate about the devotional character of the late medieval *Pearl* is largely settled. Heather Phillips has convincingly argued that *Pearl* is an essentially Eucharistic work, thereby laying to rest a decades-old debate about the poem’s central image—the Lamb of God upon an altar of sacrifice (Rev. 8:3-5) as it relates to late medieval Eucharistic devotion. The outcome of the
critical debate about *Pearl* has important implications for scholars of the York Cycle, especially given the close correspondence between the last stanza of *Pearl* and the moment of sacrifice in the York *Abraham and Isaac* (York X).

This dissertation seeks to show how several of the York Cycle’s pageants give literary and dramatic expression to the theology of the Feast of Corpus Christi, and it examines furthermore the literary and historical causes of the Eucharist’s hiddenness in not just one but two masterpieces of late medieval English invention—the York Cycle and *Pearl*. By exploring all available evidence from cultural milieu—liturgical texts and accoutrements, stained glass, painted glass, wood carving, stone sculpture, ivory carving, embroidery, xylographic books, and historical records—this dissertation seeks to demonstrate that the York Cycle sustains in textual and contextual analysis the notion that the plays were crafted specifically to celebrate the Feast of the Body of Christ. The Infancy Plays in particular—the *Nativity* (XIV), the *Shepherds* (XV), and the *Magi* (XVIb)—form a coherent Eucharistic sequence, while the *Baptism* (XXI) sets the stage for the Passion. Another Eucharistic series is comprised of *Christ’s Appearance to Mary Magdalene* (XXXIX), *Emmaus* (XL), and *The Incredulity of Thomas* (XLI). The fourteenth-century *Pearl*’s treatment of its Eucharistic theme is accomplished through a similar artistic strategy, and this observation becomes especially significant in light of a parallel between the York *Abraham and Isaac* (X) and the closing stanza of *Pearl*, whose last lines are generically modeled on lay-devotional elevation prayers commonly recited at Mass. Such homage to the Eucharist, tucked away within the layered intricacy of an aesthetic of hiddenness, has been articulated best of all, perhaps, by the words of a hymn of St. Thomas Aquinas—*Adoro te devote latens Deitas*. 
This dissertation by Marcel Antonio Brown fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in English approved by Stephen K. Wright, Ph.D., as Director, and by Lilla Kopár, Ph.D., and Daniel R. Gibbons, Ph.D. as Readers.

_______________________________________
Stephen K. Wright, Ph.D., Director

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Lilla Kopár, Ph.D., Reader

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Daniel R. Gibbons, Ph.D., Reader
To Marlene
The first act of the divine drama was enacted, not only on no stage set up above the sightseer, but on a dark and curtained stage sunken out of sight; and that is an idea very difficult to express in most modes of artistic expression. It is the idea of simultaneous happenings on different levels of life. Something like it may have been attempted in the more archaic and decorative medieval art … perhaps it could have been best conveyed by the characteristic expedient of some of the medieval guilds, when they wheeled about the streets a theatre with three stages one above the other, with heaven above the earth and hell under the earth.

— G. K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man
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Chapter I

Introduction

The City of York in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries was especially well known for its annual city-wide production of an elaborate and impressive series of biblical pageants known in its own time as the *Corpus Christi plaies*. Beginning with *The Fall of the Angels* (York I) and ending with *Doomsday* (York XLVII), the sequence of plays which altogether constitutes the York Corpus Christi Cycle was designed to involve the entire civic body in a day-long re-enactment of the drama of salvation. This yearly undertaking of truly monumental proportions was substantally supported by the city’s many associations of craftsmen or “guilds”: each play was assigned to a guild which then became responsible for ‘bringing forth’ its own pageant. Specific guilds’ responsibility for one pageant or another can sometimes be difficult to comprehend in retrospect, yet very often the rationale is self-evident. The Shipwrights sponsored the play of *The Building of the Ark* (VIII), for example, while the Pinners (nail-makers) sponsored the play of *The Crucifixion* (XXXV). The plays were performed serially at twelve pre-designated stations across the city; sets were built upon pageant wagons which were drawn from one station to the next in what has been referred to as ‘true processional’ staging.¹

¹ For a brief introduction to processional staging, see Clifford Davidson, *Illustrations of the Stage and Acting* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 22 fll. For more in-depth discussions of processional staging in York over the course of the cycle’s history, see Meg Twycross, “‘Places to hear the play’: Pageant Stations at York, 1398-1572” (*REED Newsletter* 2, 1978), 10-33, and Eileen White, “Places for Hearing the Corpus Christi Play in York” (*Medieval English Theatre* 9, 1987), 23-63. The number of stations changed over the course of the cycle’s long history. For the original number of twelve stations, see the York A/Y Memorandum Book, AD 1399, in Alexandra Johnston, *Records of Early English Drama: York* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 11.
The York Cycle’s route began near the Dominican Friary at Toft Green, processing from there throughout the city and ending upon the Pavement near All Saints Church. One of the ways the pageant-wagons’ route is known is because, like so many other details of the Cycle’s history, it has been recorded in the city’s official civic records, which have survived with enough frequency to fill what might otherwise be crucial gaps in our historical knowledge.² The map below (Fig. 1) shows an aerial view of the City of York with the processional stations numbered in the order in which pageant wagons once went their way through medieval York.

² Civic records relevant to late medieval English drama have been located, transcribed, and published in the University of Toronto’s Records of Early English Drama (REED) series. For the volume pertinent to the York Cycle, see Alexandra Johnston, Records of Early English Drama: York (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979). The A/Y Memorandum Book, being the official guild records and civic records of the City of York, is the most often-cited source for historical evidence relevant to the Cycle; it was comprised of a ‘major register’, a ‘new register’, and an index. This ‘working book’ contains records ranging in dates from 1327-1547; the REED volume’s chronological range, however, combines other sources as well and therefore contains records dating 1220-1551.
Fig. 1. The processional pageant route of the York Corpus Christi Cycle in 1399.3

Stational pageantry was thus performed so as to optimize the number of spectators. Audiences would wait at each stop, and each wagon would come to each audience; the many audiences were thus more numerous than any single audience could possibly have been. This manner of performance is believed to have begun at dawn and to have come to a close after midnight.4

The relationship of each of the pageants to one another is complex. The diagram below (Fig. 2) may serve as a foundational illustration of the typological scheme of the plays’ form. Each arc connects two or more plays which are linked thematically or typologically. For the sake of economy, the diagram below contains a much abbreviated schema of just sixteen plays:

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3 Reproduced from Clifford Davidson, *Illustrations of the Stage and Acting* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 27. For the date 1399, see n. 1 above.
The Fall of the Angels is thus a precursor to the Fall of Man; the Fall of Man, meanwhile, is ‘balanced’ by the ‘counterpoint’ provided by the Temptation in the Desert. In a similar way, the Sacrifice of Isaac prefigures both the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, since Isaac is not sacrificed in the end but instead is delivered when a sheep takes his place upon the altar of holocaust. Such typological internal linkage is the essence of cyclic form. The sequence of plays performed in medieval York was of course much longer than what appears in the figure above,

5 Adapted from V. A. Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 85, with arcs rather than brackets used to illustrate typological connections.
and the Cycle itself consequently bears many more complex interlinkages than may be glimpsed in just sixteen of the original series of pageants. The vastness of the Cycle’s scope of production and subject matter, along with the other complexities of the Cycle—logistical, typological, theological—implies centuries of development for which there actually exists a wealth of documentary evidence.

The earliest civic record relevant to the performance of the York Cycle dates to 1376, when first mention of the *pagine Corporis Christi* appears in the York A/Y Memorandum Book. By scarcely twenty years later, the York Cycle had apparently gained enough stature to attract a royal audience, with King Richard II in attendance for the annual festivities on Corpus Christi Day in 1399. The cycle’s list of plays, the *Ordo Paginarum*, first appears in the civic records in 1415, thus confirming that by that year the scope of the annual performance approximated what now appears in the Register. 1463-77 marks the period during which the civic authority began to compile an official version of the texts of the plays into a book (referred to now as the York Register, or simply the Register) which preserves the only surviving copy of the York Cycle.

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8 For the *Ordo Paginarum* or ‘order of pageants’, see Johnston, *REED: York*, 16-26.
9 Only one of the York pageants survives in another manuscript, and just a handful of plays have close analogues among the Towneley Plays. York XLI, the Scriveners’ pageant of *The Incredulity of Thomas*, actually survives in a later prompt copy—York, City Archives, Acc. 104/G.1, also known as the Sykes Manuscript. For discussions of this manuscript, see A. C. Cawley, “The Sykes Manuscript of the Scriveners’ Play” (*Leeds Studies in English and Kindred Languages* 7-8, 1952), 45-80, and Richard Beadle, *York Plays: A Critical Edition of the York Corpus Christi Play as recorded in British Library Additional MS 35290* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xxxi-xxxiii. Five pageants of the York Register are believed to have been the sources from which the Towneley Plays borrowed heavily in their presentation of Moses and Pharaoh (York XX, Towneley XVIII), Christ and the Doctors (York XXXVII, Towneley XXV), *The Harrowing of Hell* (York XXXVIII, Towneley XXVI), and Doomsday (York XLVII, Towneley XXX). The Towneley Manuscript—Huntington Library HM 1, located at The Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California—thus preserves several of the York pageants, each in a more or less heavily revised state. For a brief discussion of the relationship of Huntington Library HM 1 to the York Register, see Beadle, *York Plays: A Critical Edition*, xxxiii-xxxiv.
Another royal visit was made by King Richard III on Corpus Christi Day in 1483, and, just five years later in 1487, King Henry VII became the last sitting English Monarch to witness the City of York’s famous Corpus Christi pageantry, attending the performance in the year after his marriage to Elizabeth of York. The plays continued to be performed annually until 1579, by which time the City of York’s request to bring forth the pageants was met with an official subpoena of the Register by Archbishop Hutton of the Queen’s Council of the North.

Text and Manuscript Transmission

Because this dissertation presents hypotheses about staging on the basis of textual analysis, the history of the text is a keystone for the overarching discussion of the York Cycle’s much broader performance history. London, British Library Additional Manuscript 35290—also called the York Register—was the official civic record of the City of York for the period dating from ca. 1463 (when the Register’s compilation is estimated to have begun) until 1579 when the Register was irretrievably confiscated from the civic authority by the ecclesiastical authority. The manuscript preserves, sometimes more and sometimes less completely, forty-seven of the York Cycle’s pageants, yet historical records show that, at the height of its performance, there were

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12 See Beadle, *York Plays*, xxi-xxii. It is not entirely clear whether plans to bring forth the pageants in 1579 and 1580 were ever successful, but it seems as though the City of York’s last recorded request for permission to play the cycle was met with a summons for the play-texts so that they could be … ‘perused.’ From that time onward, there is no further record of Corpus Christi pageantry in the City of York.
nearly sixty pageants in the Cycle.\textsuperscript{13} Several pageants do not survive, but most exist in at least one copy in the Register, while a handful of pageants survive in two versions.\textsuperscript{14} During the time of the Register’s official civic use in the latter century of the York Cycle’s performance history, it was kept by the Common Clerk of the City of York at the first station of the York Cycle’s processional route.\textsuperscript{15} From at least 1538, the Register was presumably used for the purpose of checking the text against the spoken accuracy of the pageants; at the first station, each of the performances themselves was compared to the playtexts as they appeared in the city’s official record, the Register.\textsuperscript{16}

Various civic records from York corroborate Beadle’s logical inference that the Register would have been used to record the official text and to verify the accuracy of live performances. Entries in the City Chamberlains’ Rolls and the York House Books suggest, furthermore, that the Register was used in this twofold manner well before and well after 1538.\textsuperscript{17} It therefore seems

\textsuperscript{13} See Johnston, \textit{REED: York}, 25-6, AD 1415.
\textsuperscript{14} See n. 9, above. In addition to York XLI surviving in both the Register and the Sykes MS, the York play of the \textit{Magi} (XVI) was submitted in two copies on account of its dual sponsorship by the Masons and the Goldsmiths after ca. 1432. See Beadle, \textit{York Plays: A Critical Edition}, 107. Cp. Johnston, \textit{REED: York}, 47 fll. When Scribe B took over for Scribe A in the early history of the manuscript’s compilation, a second copy of York III (York IIIb) was added. For more on the manuscript’s four scribes, see the discussion on p. 9, below.
\textsuperscript{15} See Johnston, \textit{REED: York}, 263, where the City Chamberlains’ Books refer to “the ffyrst place at Trentyte yaites” as the place “where as the Comon Clerke keyps the Registre”. For a brief note about the import of this historical record for the Register’s probable purpose and historical use, see Beadle, \textit{York Play: A Facsimile}, ix.
\textsuperscript{16} Again, see Beadle, \textit{York Play: A Facsimile}, ix.
\textsuperscript{17} From as early as 1501, as Beadle observes (\textit{York Play: A Facsimile}, ix), the first station is referred to by the City Chamberlains’ Rolls as the \textit{locum Communis Clerici} or “place of the Common Clerk” (see Johnston, \textit{REED: York}, 187). Among the expenses recorded for the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1527, bread and wine were given to compensate Thomas Clerk for “keeping the Register” (Johnston, \textit{REED: York}, 244). The first station is again mentioned in the 1542 “leases of Corpus Christi Day” as the place where “the common Clerk kepes the Reyester” (Johnston, \textit{REED: York}, 278). In 1559, the City Chamberlains’ Books contain the entry, “Item payd to Iohn Clerke for entrying in the Regyster the Regynall [the original] of the pagyant pertenyng to Craft of ffulars whiche was never before Regestred” (Johnston, \textit{REED: York}, 330). In 1567, the York House Books give evidence of one final effort to gather all of the unregistered pageants into the official record: “Aggreed that the Pageantes of Corpus Christi suche as be not already Registred shalbe with all convenyent spede be fayre wrytten by Iohn Clerke in the [bo] old Registre” (Johnston, \textit{REED: York}, 351). All such historical records (also noted in Beadle, \textit{York Play: A Facsimile}, ix) indicate that the York Register was (i) used as the official record of the York Corpus Christi pageants and (ii) that the York Register played an essential part in the logistics of Corpus Christi pageantry in York from as early as
entirely possible that the Register might even have been used for this purpose from the time of its very first compilation in ca. 1463-77, and it is thus tempting to speculate that the Register may actually have been created for this express purpose. If such be the case, then the purpose of the Register was most likely to establish and maintain the integrity and stability of the York Cycle’s textual and performance tradition. Whatever the impetus for compiling the Register, it was in its own time, as it is now, the ‘standard edition’ or ‘authorized version’ of the York Corpus Christi Plays, as even scribal evidence seems to confirm.  

In other ways, however, the Register was not such a fixed or static document, even though it represents a stable textual tradition by any standards. The Register was a constant among the City of York’s civic records for more than a century, and the manuscript itself was the work of primarily one scribe. Four different scribes are nonetheless known to have copied pageants into the Register, producing the record which we now have—not itself the complete record originally envisioned. The manuscript’s four scribes’ work has been discussed in detail by Richard Beadle, who suggests the following way of breaking down each scribe’s individual contribution to the manuscript of the Register:

1501. Given the sporadic mention of the Register and its uses, it would not be a stretch to suggest that the Register was created for the twofold purpose of recording the plays and checking that record against the accuracy of those plays’ performance.

18 See Beadle, York Play: A Facsimile, xx: “All the scripts employed by the main scribe were based on models of the more formal varieties available at the time, and this would have made both the basic copying and the rubrication processes more time-consuming and expensive than they otherwise might have been. Whatever his exemplars were like, the main scribe sought to produce a dignified volume of homogeneous appearance, which no doubt befitted the importance of the play in civic eyes.”

19 The words “textual tradition” in this context must of course refer to the era which followed the compilation of the manuscript, meaning the text after ca. 1463-77. Since there are no older witnesses, it is impossible to tell how well the later “tradition” represented by the Register matches what must have been many decades of textual development up to that time. About any earlier tradition, nothing can be said, since no texts survive from any earlier date.

20 See Beadle, York Play: A Facsimile, xix fll.
Scribe A: The first but certainly not the main scribe, this fifteenth-century copyist wrote in a Bastard Secretary hand during the manuscript’s initial compilation.\(^{21}\) He contributed York I, II, and IIIa during the period which spanned ca. 1463-77.\(^{22}\)

Scribe B: The main scribe, and the most prolific copyist of pageants by far, wrote in a Bastard Secretary hand, adding piecemeal all of the manuscript’s pageants except for York IV, XVIII, parts of VII, XLVI, and the contributions of Scribe A, above.\(^{23}\) Apparently, Scribe B took over for Scribe A after the copying of York IIIa (and in fact provided a second copy, York IIIb). He was active, like Scribe A, during the compilation of the Register in ca. 1463-77.\(^{24}\)

Scribe C: A sixteenth-century scribe writing in a Secretary hand—John Clerke, by name—was responsible for several later additions, copying York IV in ca. 1558, XVIII after 1567, and part of VII at an unknown date.\(^{25}\) Beginning in 1542, Clerke is known to have been the keeper of the Register; from his marginal entries and corrections throughout the manuscript, one may deduce that the purpose of the Register was to maintain the accuracy of the annual live performance of the plays, or else to correct the Register in light of the

\(^{21}\) Ibid., xx - xxi.  
\(^{22}\) Ibid., xx.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., xx - xxi.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid., xx. Scribe B, importantly, was the professional copyist of all of the pageants discussed in the body of this dissertation.  
\(^{25}\) Ibid., xx - xxi.  
prompt copies or guild copies of the plays themselves.\textsuperscript{27} Given the fact that the Register does not have nearly enough erasures and emendations to sustain the latter theory, the former seems much more likely: the purpose of the Register was most likely to maintain the integrity and continuity of live performance.\textsuperscript{28}

Scribe D: The copyist responsible for the Innholders’ \textit{Coronation of the Virgin} (XLVI) in ca. 1559.\textsuperscript{29}

Scribal emendations and additions are discussed by Beadle at length, with an exhaustive list of corrections provided in his facsimile edition.\textsuperscript{30} Given that such changes hold most sway in local analysis, I pass up any detailed discussion of scribal corrections at this time in order to discuss instead a much more interesting phenomenon where the Cycle’s diachronic changes are concerned; namely, the Register’s many excisions … certainly of lines here and there, but sometimes even of whole leaves or entire pageants.

The sixteenth-century excisions from the York Register are perhaps the most salient example of the official civic record’s pliability in the changing religious and political climate which enveloped the manuscript in its later history. It might give one pause, for example, that this dissertation proposes to treat the topic of the Eucharist in the York Cycle without discussing the York play of \textit{The Last Supper} (XXVII); and although this might at first seem to be an oversight, the rationale for omitting it from this study is tied to the state of the manuscript and its

\textsuperscript{27} See Beadle’s discussion in \textit{ibid.}, xxii.

\textsuperscript{28} Also see n. 17, above.


textual history. At the very moment when York XXVII is about to present a dramatic reenactment of the Last Supper’s prefiguration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice of the Mass, there is a leaf missing from the manuscript.\textsuperscript{31} It is impossible to know when or why this leaf was excised, but other historical-contextual evidence points to the strong probability that the excision occurred as a result of the religious controversies of the Reformation.\textsuperscript{32}

Civic records show that Marian doctrine was specifically suppressed in York during the latter part of the sixteenth century through a process of incremental omission and excision which culminated in the confiscation of the York Register altogether in 1579.\textsuperscript{33} Beginning in 1548, the York pageants of The Death of the Virgin (York XLIV, the ‘Fergus’), The Assumption of the Virgin (XLV), and the Coronation of the Virgin (XLVI) were not performed.\textsuperscript{34} Scarcely a decade later, efforts to complete the Register in 1557 and 1559 were so hampered by doctrinal controversy that the manuscript’s compiler did not even leave space in the Register for the play

\textsuperscript{32} For similar historical-political influences in the case of the Towneley Plays, see A. C. Cawley, The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle (Oxford: Manchester University Press, 1958), 125, where The Commissioners’ Instructions concerning the Wakefield Play (a historical record from York) are cited: “xxvij die Maii Anno domini 1576 loco Consistoriali ecclesie Eboracensis Coram Magistris Mattheo Hutton Iohanne Gibson ... in the towne of Wakefeld shalbe plaied this yere in Whitsonweke next or theraboutes a plaie commonlie called Corpus Christi plaie which hath been heretofore vsed which tend to the Derogation of the Maiestie and glorie of god the prophanation of the Sacramentes and the maunteynaunce of superstition and idolatrie / The said Commissioners Decred a lettre to be written and sent to the Balyffe Burgesses and other inhabitants of the said towne of Wakefeld that in the said playe no Pageant be vsed or set further wherein the Maiestye of god the father god the sonne or god the holie ghoste or the administration of either the Sacramentes of Baptisme or of the lords Supper be counterfeyted or represented / or any thinge plaied which tende to the maintenaunce of superstition or idolatrie or which be contrarie to the laws of god or of the Realme / Which lettre was sent accordinglie and was subscribed with the hands of the said Dominus Hutton and of others of the Counsell and commission.”
\textsuperscript{33} See Johnston, REED: York, 390, and also Beadle, York Plays: A Critical Edition, xxii. On March 24th, 1567, Matthew Hutton wrote the following after perusing the manuscript: “I have pervsed the bokez that your Lorshipp with your bretheren sent me and as I finde manie things that I muche like because of thantiquitie, so see I manie things, that I can not allowe, because they be Disagreinge from the sinceritie of the gospel, the which things, yf they shuld either be altogether cancelled, or altered into other matter, the whole drift of the play shuld be altered, and therefore I dare not put my pen vnto it, because I want bothe skill, and leasure, to amende it …” (Johnston, REED: York, 353).
of *The Purification of the Virgin* (XVIII).\(^{35}\) In 1567, another decade later still, the play was added nonetheless, albeit very much out of place, finally appearing at this time near the very end of the manuscript, in fols. 227\(^v\)-232\(^r\).\(^{36}\) *The Funeral of the Virgin* (XLIVa) was never even added to the Register, nor was a space left open for the inclusion of the play in the manuscript’s gatherings, presumably for the same reason that the York Cycle’s other Marian plays were suppressed, excised, or simply not performed from around the mid-sixteenth century until the end of the Cycle’s history of performance.

The civic records’ account of what happened to the York Marian plays sheds significant sidelight on what may have happened to many of the dramatic moments wherein specifically Eucharistic teachings would have been enacted in the York Cycle. Apart from the excision of the prefiguration of the consecration from the play of *The Last Supper* (XXVII), two lines are also missing from *The Supper at Emmaus* (XL) very near the moment of the post-resurrection consecration.\(^{37}\) Whereas the absence of a leaf in *The Agony in the Garden and the Betrayal* (XVIII) could perhaps have more debatable causes, much less ambiguous are the likely motives behind the excision of dramatic lines and scenes which would have lent themselves especially to enactments of the consecration and of transubstantiation.\(^{38}\) Such Eucharistic moments could have been targeted when the York Register was summoned for review by Archbishop Matthew

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\(^{35}\) See Beadle’s discussion of the collation of the manuscript of the Register in *York Play: A Facsimile*, x-xvi, where it is observed that the main scribe would sometimes leave “blank leaves with the name of a craft guild” (xvi) in a place where a pageant was expected but had not yet been forthcoming. In this case, no such series of blank leaves was left.

\(^{36}\) See Beadle, *York Plays: A Critical Edition*, xxii and 126. The body of this dissertation thus does not treat *The Purification of the Virgin* as part of the Infancy Sequence for at least two reasons: first, on account of the late date of this play’s addition to the manuscript; second, because of its placement in the Register near the end of the manuscript, very close to the other Marian plays. These two aspects of manuscript history suggest that *The Purification* more appropriately belongs to the York Cycle’s later history, and perhaps to its Marian plays as a separate and possibly coherent group.


\(^{38}\) See n. 32, above.
Hutton, Dean of York and “member of Her Majesty’s Commission for Ecclesiastical Causes in the North”, in 1568.\textsuperscript{39} In the very same year as the Northern Uprising (1569), which was itself triggered by royal intolerance of Catholic devotion in the north, the York Register was summoned once again by Dean Hutton. Just ten years later, in 1579, it was asked for one last time, only to be permanently withheld from the City of York, in whose safekeeping the manuscript had remained for more than a century. History is thus unambiguous about the immediate cause of the demise of the York Cycle: in the end, the Queen’s Council of the North, and particularly the Archbishop and Dean of York, ultimately denied the City of York’s request to continue to observe their long-held civic tradition of Corpus Christi pageantry.\textsuperscript{40}

After the year of the Cycle’s confiscation by the ecclesiastical authority, there is a gap in our knowledge of the York Register’s whereabouts from the years 1579 to 1695.\textsuperscript{41} After this time, however, the manuscript’s succession of ownership is well documented from 1695 up to the present day.\textsuperscript{42} At some point between 1695 and 1708, the manuscript passed out of the possession of Henry Fairfax and into the holdings of Ralph Thoresby, an antiquarian; whence it was purchased by Horace Walpole in 1764 and, at the time of the liquidation of Walpole’s Strawberry Hill estate, sold to B. H. Bright in 1842, only to be acquired upon Bright’s death in 1844 by Rev. Thomas Russell and subsequently handed on to Lord Ashburnham, from whose


\textsuperscript{40} The York House Books read as follows in the year 1579: “Also it is agreed by thes presens that Corpus christi play shalbe played this yere And that first the booke shalbe carried to my Lord Archebisshop and Mr Deane to correcte, if that my Lord Archebisshop doo well like thereon” (Johnston, \textit{REED: York}, 390)—the last known reference to the York Register in the records of early English drama.

\textsuperscript{41} Beadle, \textit{York Play: A Facsimile}, ix-x.

\textsuperscript{42} As Beadle notes in \textit{York Play: A Facsimile}, “a series of inscriptions and bookplates record to a great extent the later history of the manuscript” (x), q.v. especially the manuscript’s front flyleaves.
belongings the York Register was eventually sold at auction by Sotheby’s to the British Museum in the year 1899.43

Cycle and Feast

Given the very long performance history of the York Cycle, a history which spanned more than two hundred years (1376-1579), three centuries (14th, 15th, 16th), and sixteen English monarchs (Edward III to Elizabeth I), the present study takes special interest in one of the cycle’s very few unchanging constants, its annual date of performance—the Feast of Corpus Christi.44 The feast itself originated in the Low Countries during the thirteenth century, which in some ways suggests that the story of the York Corpus Christi Cycle must therefore be traced back even further, even to the very rebirth of devotion to the Eucharist which was the hallmark of western European devotion in the late medieval period.45 Corpus Christi—the theology and how it gave rise to the feast—is therefore another very fitting point of departure for the discussion which is to follow in this dissertation’s body chapters.

44 One noteworthy qualification perhaps needs to be made here: once every decade, the performance of the cycle was displaced by the performance of a Creed Play (now lost). This was staged on the same day as the cycle would have been performed, Corpus Christi Day. For more on this tradition, see Stephen K. Wright, “The York Creed Play in Light of the Innsbruck Playbook of 1391” (*Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 5, 1991), 27-53. Also see Alexandra Johnston, “William Revetour, Chaplain and Clerk of York, Testator,” (*Leeds Studies in English* 29, 1998), 153-71, and Alexandra Johnston, “The Plays of the Religious Guilds of York” (*Speculum* 50.1, 1975), 59.
45 For an in-depth discussion of this aspect of late medieval culture, see Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter II of this dissertation.
Although the Fourth Lateran Council had formally defined the dogma of transubstantiation in 1215, the ecumenical council did not at that time make any provision for the institution of a commemorative feast day. What began as a doctrinal definition intended to settle debate and clarify church teaching would become, in the course of the next century, one of the most important influences on late medieval piety. The Feast of Corpus Christi thus originated some time after Lateran IV, rather than as an immediate consequence of the council; and the feast’s place of birth was in the town of Liège, in the Low Countries, rather than in Rome.\(^{46}\) Juliana of Liège (1192-1258), or Juliana of Mt. Cornillon (as she is sometimes called),\(^{47}\) was a Canoness Regular and, later in life, a beguine\(^{48}\) who began having mystical visions at the very young age of eighteen. In these visions, the Lord Jesus ostended to Juliana a moon with a large portion missing: the moon symbolized the Church, he said, and the absent portion the lack of a liturgical solemnity designed specifically to honor the mystery of the Eucharist.\(^{49}\) The Lord communicated to Juliana his desire for the Church’s worship to be made more perfect by means of the institution of a feast in honor of the Sacrament of His Body and Blood.

At first, Juliana kept these mystical visions to herself, although she eventually shared the narrative of her visions with a close friend and confidant, Eve of Saint-Martin, who in turn told


\(^{48}\) A consecrated member of the lay faithful who did not live in a monastic community; an itinerant, semi-monastic individual who, in the absence of a single stable religious community, could be more or less loosely associated with many such houses.

\(^{49}\) See the standard *vita*, qtd. in Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 170, n. 42 and 43: *Apparebat, inquam, et luna in suo splendore, cum aliquantula tamen sui sphærici corporis fractione; quam cum multo tempore conspexisset, mirabatur multum, ignorans quid illa portenderet ... Tunc revelavit ei Christus; in luna praesentem ecclesiam, in luna autem fractione, defectum unius solemnitatis in Ecclesia figurari, quam adhuc volebat in terris a suis fidelibus celebrari.*
the story to her friend the Archdeacon of Liège, Jacques Pantaléon (1200-1264). Prominent in local ecclesiastical politics, Pantaléon eventually served as a papal legate in Germany and in Eastern Europe and, after shepherding flocks of faithful as Bishop of Verdun (1253) and as Patriarch of Jerusalem (1255), was elected to the papacy in 1261. Under the name Urban IV, Pantaléon promulgated the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1264, issuing the Papal Bull *Transiturus* which would eventually extend the celebration of the feast to the universal church. Pope Urban IV died, however, before he could bring *Transiturus* fully into effect as the canonical norm in Western Christendom.

For a long time thereafter, *Transiturus* thus remained unpromulgated in the countries of western Europe, even though the Feast of Corpus Christi itself was slowly spreading through individual dioceses in Germany and Italy. The cause of the Bull’s promulgation was eventually taken up by Pope Clement V, however, in 1311-12; but the death of Clement V before the promulgation of the collection of canons known as the Clementines delayed the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi yet again. Not until Pope John XXII sealed the Clementines in 1317 was the Feast of Corpus Christi first observed in England, with the feast’s earliest observances beginning in London and Gloucestershire. By 1325, the feast is proclaimed in the Diocese of York for the first time. For another fifty years, though, the official records of the City of York

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52 For an interesting brief history of how the local observance of Corpus Christi in Liège eventually became the norm in the western church, see Walters, *Feast of Corpus Christi*, 11-15. See also Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 185 flf.
54 Ibid., 182.
make no particular mention of any city-wide celebration of Corpus Christi through the performance of civic drama, not at least until the first record of pageant wagons appears in the city’s official records in 1376.55

In York, as in the rest of late medieval England, the Feast of Corpus Christi was celebrated once every year on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday itself fell one week after Pentecost, and Pentecost came fifty days after Easter. Following the dating of Easter, the York Cycle was thus performed annually near the end of May or sometime during the month of June. Considering the timing of other late medieval English biblical cycles—some were performed on Whitsunday, for example—it is not surprising that the generic subtitle ‘Corpus Christi Cycle’ has been viewed with suspicion or even cast off altogether in serious critical discourse where some of the other cycles have been the subject of discussion.

The York Cycle is nonetheless exceptional among extant late medieval English biblical cycles, especially where its relationship to Eucharistic piety is concerned. Only in the City of York, for example, was there a cycle whose annual date of performance was so closely tied to the Feast of Corpus Christi. From the very beginning to the very end of the York Cycle’s documented history, the pageants were always played on the Feast of the Body of Christ. In Chester, by contrast, the scope of the city’s annual cycle-drama was much smaller, and although pageants were played there annually on Corpus Christi Day from ca. 1422-1474, the city nonetheless moved the plays to Whitsuntide during the fifteenth century and to a three-day performance schedule during Whitsunweek for the remainder of the plays’ performance

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history. To draw yet another important contrast, the evidence in the case of Wakefield strongly supports Barbara Palmer’s argument that the plays of the Towneley manuscript were neither a cycle nor from Wakefield, and that they instead represent a sixteenth-century compilation of pageants whose connections to Wakefield and the Feast of Corpus Christi are at best tenuous.

Even more radically different from the York Cycle is the N-Town collection, which was once again neither a cycle nor played on the Feast of Corpus Christi.

The widely divergent textual and performance histories of the “Great Corpus Christi Cycles” thus cast into relief the causes which might compel a reader to be suspicious of linking the Feast of Corpus Christi to any given example of late medieval cycle-drama. In three out of four cases, history has shown that there is no connection between cycle and feast. William Tydeman has summed it up rather neatly in the following observation:

It has been common to attach a good deal of importance to the institution of the Feast of Corpus Christi during the fourteenth century as stimulating the growth of popular religious theatre. This festival, inaugurated as a thanksgiving for Christ’s gift of his body on the cross and in the Eucharist for the benefit of humankind, was introduced into the Church calendar in 1311; its observance rapidly became a

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56 See Lawrence Clopper, “The History and Development of the Chester Cycle” (Modern Philology 75.3, 1978), 243-4. Another important contrast to the York Cycle is the Chester plays’ original scope and tradition: whereas the York Cycle was complete by 1415 (i.e., had a Fall-of-the-angels to Doomsday arc), the Chester plays actually grew out of the tradition of Passion sequences which characterized Corpus Christi pageantry in the south of England in the later Middle Ages. Not until the sixteenth century did the plays at Chester even begin to approach the scope of what had by that time been performed annually at York for more than a century.

57 See Barbara D. Palmer, “Recycling ‘The Wakefield Cycle’: The Records” (Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama 41, 2002), 88-131. Like Chester, Towneley has a late manuscript date, having been placed recently at ca. 1553-58 (Palmer, “Recycling”, 88).

highpoint in the religious year, being celebrated in early summer with a street procession of clergy and lay dignitaries behind the Communion Host. At some centres, particularly in Spain, it became the custom for the townsfolk to dress in biblical costume as they accompanied the parade through the city, and then to organise a series of static tableaux on floats to form an integral part of the procession. It is at least plausible that these tableaux or pageants formed the excuse for the development of short dialogues which suitably expanded became the cycle, mystery or miracle plays associated in many countries with the Feast of Corpus Christi. However, this explanation of the evolution of the genre must be treated cautiously, since it cannot account for the genesis of every scriptural sequence known to us.\footnote{William Tydeman, “An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre”, in Richard Beadle, ed., \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 20-21.}

Tydeman’s refutation of the association between cycle and feast holds true in any debate conducted on the level of the pan-European development of cycle-drama over the course of many centuries. The case of the York Cycle is different, however, because the question here is not general but particular: in York we appear to have the great original in the English tradition, a Corpus Christi Cycle \textit{par excellence}—the oldest surviving manuscript in England, the earliest civic records in England, and the only late medieval English biblical cycle with a historically established connection to the Feast of Corpus Christi from the beginning of the cycle’s history to its end. All of these are reasons for examining much more closely the York Cycle’s Eucharistic
allusions as bearing an unparalleled degree of importance in the study of late medieval English cycle-drama.

The York Cycle, Lammas, and Pearl

In the broader context of both history and aesthetics, there were ways in which the York Cycle and Pearl were singularly connected to the Eucharist. On Corpus Christi Day in 1426, Fr. William Melton, OFM, Professor of Holy Pageantry (sacre pagine professor), visited the City of York to preach in honor of the feast. It was a pivotal moment in the history of the cycle: Fr. Melton's sermons apparently persuaded the civic authority to move the local liturgical observance of the Feast of Corpus Christi to the Friday after Trinity Sunday (displacing the observance of the procession by one day) in order to allow the lay faithful to participate in those liturgical exercises which carried with them certain papal indulgences in accordance with the bull Transiturus. It is astounding to think that, rather than move the annual performance of the cycle in order to leave the feast on its assigned day, the City of York actually displaced instead

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60 The episode is recorded in the York A/Y Memorandum Book, printed in Johnston, REED: York, 42-4.
61 Fr. William Melton, OFM, in persuading the City of York to adopt this new custom in 1426, appealed to the many indulgences offered for the observance of the Liturgy of the Hours by the lay faithful, specifically as had been promised by Pope Urban IV at the time of the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1264: “Those faithful in Christ, who attended at morning service at the said feast of the church where it was celebrated, an hundred days; those at the mass, the same; those also, who came to the first vespers of the said feast, the like an hundred days; the same in the second; to those also, who were at the first, third, sixth, and ninth completry offices, for every hour of those, forty days; to those also, who attended service on the octaves of the said feast, at mattins [sic] or vespers, mass, or the aforesaid hours, an hundred days for every day of the said octaves”—in Francis Drake, Eboracum: or, The History and Antiquities of the City of York (York: T. Wilson and R. Spence, 1788), 316. For the original Latin text of this record, see Johnston, REED: York, 43.
the feast day itself—an emphatic expression of how important it was that the plays be associated as directly as possible with the Feast of Corpus Christi.

The civic authority’s emphasis on maintaining the cycle’s association with the Eucharist is attested by yet another historical event, this one having taken place in the latter part of the fifteenth century. In 1487, Lord Scrope of Bolton and Lambert Simnel led a rebellion against Henry VII early in the month of June, right around the time when the city would normally have brought forth the plays. The performance that year was moved from its usual Corpus Christi Day observance to be played instead on the Feast of Lammas. There were two reasons for this adjustment: first, moving the celebration allowed the city to accommodate the attendance of King Henry VII, who had planned since the suppression of the rebellion to visit the City of York in order to knight William Todd, Mayor of York, and Richard York, an Alderman, for the role each had played in suppressing Scrope and Simnel’s rebellion. The second reason for moving the celebration to Lammas was to do with the Feast of Lammas itself and its connection to Eucharistic devotion in an agrarian society.

There were at least two late medieval English cultural celebrations of the mystery of the Eucharist, that is—the Feast of Corpus Christi, and the Feast of Lammas. Celebrated each year at the beginning of the month of August, at the time of the harvest, Lammas was observed by tenant farmers in the oblation of their gifts of the first-fruits of the grain harvest for consecration and even for immediate use in the Eucharistic Sacrifice of the Mass. The observance of Lammas in York apparently involved the presentation of a lamb by the herdsmen associated with the

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63 One could make an argument for a third such celebration on Holy Thursday, yet Corpus Christi was created and promulgated throughout the Christian West specifically because Maundy Thursday was widely regarded as a celebration of the institution of the priesthood rather than of the Sacrament of the Altar.
The fact that the York Corpus Christi Cycle was rescheduled to the Feast of Lammas in 1487 strongly suggests, therefore, that Lammas was in some ways seen as a suitable substitute in lieu of being able to bring forth Corpus Christi pageantry on its proper feast day. Particularly given the fact that King Henry VII was in attendance in the year the celebration was postponed, the selection of an appropriately symbolic alternative to Corpus Christi Day would perhaps have been essential, and Lammas certainly provided just such a stand-in.

Like the 1487 performance of the York Cycle, the narrative of Pearl takes place at an unexpected time of year—Lammastide. Given the setting of the dream-vision in a locus amoenus—in a garden with flowers and fragrances and birds singing, with luf-daungere and luf-longynge—and also given Pearl’s marked debt to Guillaume de Lorris’ Roman de la rose, the generically appropriate setting for the poem ought to have been the springtime, preferably in April or May. The poem takes place, however, “In Augoste in a hyʒ sesoun, / Quen corne is coruyn wyth crokez kene” (Pearl 39-40). The dream-vision takes place, that is to say, near the Feast of Lammas. It has been suggested by William Knightley, in fact, that the timing of Pearl’s narrative in early August adds significantly to the poem’s Eucharistic connection; and this

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64 See John Brand, Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1969), vol. I, 348: “Some suppose it is called Lammas Day, quasi Lamb-masse, because, on that day, the tenants who held lands of the Cathedral in York, which is dedicated to St. Peter ad Vincula, were bound by their tenure to bring a live lamb into the church at high mass. Others, according to Blount, suppose it to have been derived from the Saxon Hlað Mæsse, i.e. loaf masse, or bread masse, so named as a feast of thanksgiving to God for the first-fruits of the corn. It seems to have been observed with bread of new wheat; and accordingly it is in usage in some places for tenants to be bound to bring in wheat of that year to their lord, on or before the 1st of August.” For a brief but informative discussion of the importance of Lammastide in medieval England in general and in Pearl in particular, see William Knightley, “Pearl: the ‘hyʒ sesoun’” (Modern Language Notes 76.2, Feb., 1961), 97-102. For a more detailed explanation of the etymology, see the entry for ‘Lammas’ in the Oxford English Dictionary. For evidence of the feast’s persistence well into the sixteenth century, see Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, I.iii.16. For similar observances at Eastertide in Worcester in 1374, see Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 42.

65 All citations of Pearl are from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript, 4th ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002). 240-205-0901

66 See Knightley, “Pearl: the ‘hyʒ sesoun’,” passim.
connection is made much stronger by the poem’s own articulation of its theme—“For vch gresse mot grow of graynez dede / No whete were ellez to wonze wonne” (*Pearl* 31-2; cp. John 12:24). It is not difficult to imagine how the Feast of Lammas would likewise have ‘fit’ in the overall scheme of York’s civic theology: given the symbolism of the craft-guilds’ participation in the annual processional pageantry of the City of York, the Feast of Lammas would have presented tenant farmers and herdsmen with an analogous opportunity to offer as an oblation the first-fruits of their livelihood, grain and lamb, which together symbolize the Eucharist.

In addition to sharing such a meaningful connection to the Feast of Lammas, the York Cycle and *Pearl* also bear many aesthetic and historical affinities. To begin with, British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x, the *Pearl*-manuscript, was acquired by Sir Robert Cotton “from the library of Henry Savile of Bank, in Yorkshire (1568-1617), a great collector who secured rich spoils from the Northern monasteries and abbeys.” The other volumes of Henry Savile’s library—the *Roman de la rose*, Hugh of St. Victor’s *Didascalicon*, Baldwin of Forde’s *De corpora domini, de eucharistia*, etc.—shed an illuminating sidelight upon the mysterious MS Cotton Nero A.x,

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67 Cp. Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 38: “Traditionally, theologians had described the symbolic nature of the host in tracts of the genre *De sacramentis* and *De Sacramento altaris*, and such analysis still appears in a twelfth-century eucharistic tract containing questions based on I Cor. 11, 20, like the following question about the host: ‘Why is the bread made only of wheat? … This bread is made of nothing but wheat, patently because Christ compared himself to a grain of wheat; as he said, *A grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies.*’”

68 This symbolism dovetails well with the arguments presented in Mervyn James, “Ritual, Drama and the Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town” (*Past and Present* 98, 1983), 12: “Certainly the plays gave a wider range of resonance to the celebration of the feast. They did so, in the first place, because the Corpus Christi play cycle … helped to make Corpus Christi an occasion on which the urban community could effectively present and define itself in relation to the outside world.” Mervyn James’ view of civic theology in the case of York might best be understood in light of I Cor. 12:12: “As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ” (New American Bible, Revised Edition). These two cultural celebrations of the Eucharist—one on Corpus Christi Day, the other at Lammastide—would have given the urban and agrarian segments of society complementary opportunities for understanding their place in society in Eucharistic terms.

casting into deeper relief the character of the manuscript’s contents. In addition to being ‘at home’ in Yorkshire, *Pearl* and its textual ‘neighbors’ were once such works as would typically have occupied the shelves of late medieval England’s northern monasteries.

Within the historical ‘gap’ between 1376 and 1476, furthermore—during the period in which the York Cycle was being performed but had not yet been set down in the civic record—the Middle English *Pearl* was composed and copied into its only surviving manuscript. It has been estimated that the date of composition of *Pearl* may have been c. 1390, with the copying of the manuscript falling no later than 1400. The range of possibilities thus places the poem contemporary with the York Cycle’s earliest recorded history, and *Pearl* thus overlaps with key developments in the history of the York Cycle. Some scholars have even argued for a Yorkshire provenance for *Pearl* on the basis of linguistic evidence; and this, if true, would not be surprising, given that the manuscript itself was discovered among the holdings of a man who had acquired a number of volumes from the northern monasteries after the Act of Dissolution. Given that the last stanza of *Pearl* bears a striking resemblance to select lines of the York play of *Abraham and Isaac* (York X), one might fairly ask whether these two works could have been

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71 E. V. Gordon, ed., *Pearl* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953), xlv. Although Gordon assigns the whole group of poems—*Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness*—to the period 1360-95, he places *Pearl* at the later end of this range, and gives the likeliest range of composition to be c. 1375-1400.
72 C. O. Chapman, “The Authorship of Pearl” (*PMLA* 47.2, 1932), 352. Granted, Chapman here musters linguistic evidence to support his overarching thesis that John de Erghome (d. 1390), the Augustinian Canon of York, could have been the author of *Pearl* in c. 1370; yet no matter how incomplete Chapman’s argument about authorship might be, the linguistic evidence nonetheless stands on its own two legs and is given serious consideration in Gordon, *Pearl*, xlv.
tied to one another historically, in addition to being tied linguistically, theologically, and in terms of poetics and prosody.\textsuperscript{74}

*Pearl* has furthermore been the subject of a protracted debate at whose center has been the question of whether and how the poem may have been influenced by medieval Eucharistic theology and devotion. Similar to the ongoing dialogue about the York Cycle, the debate about *Pearl* was, for much of its history, characterized by two radically opposite schools of thought. There were on the one hand those who thought that the poem was at most tangentially concerned with the Eucharist, and there were on the other hand those who thought that the poem was centrally caught up with it. The heat of the controversy over time seemed best directed not so much at *Pearl*, but rather at the scholar who first put forth the argument that *Pearl* is Eucharistic; R. M. Garrett’s reasoning was to blame, not his evidence.\textsuperscript{75} By 1985, Garrett’s idea was finally taken up by an exceptionally circumspect scholar, Heather Phillips, who gave his thesis the argument it had deserved from the time of its inception.\textsuperscript{76} Although *Pearl* invites comparison to the York Cycle on critical grounds alone—on account of a similar history of debate, for example—this study will bring forth additional evidence of historical links between *Pearl* and

\textsuperscript{74} This dissertation will examine in Chapter VI the ways in which the textual similarities between *Pearl* and York X express strong historical-intellectual affinities of both theological tradition and devotional sentiment. For now, it simply bears mention that the earlier part of the York Cycle’s performance history coincides with the copying of *Pearl*, and that a strong argument may also be made for a Yorkshire provenance for *Pearl*.

\textsuperscript{75} For the article which first broke ground on the Eucharist in *Pearl*, see R. M. Garrett, “The Pearl: An Interpretation” (University of Washington Publications in English 4, 1918), 9-37.

\textsuperscript{76} Although the history of debate on the Eucharistic character of *Pearl* began with R. M. Garrett’s article, rebuttals soon followed in Carleton Brown, “Review” (MLN 34, 1919), 42-5, and in Rene Wellek, “Pearl: An Interpretation of the Middle English Poem” (Studies in English by Members of the English Seminar of Charles University, Prague 4, 1933), 5-33. Subsequent articles reversing the virulent criticism of Garrett’s original thesis in support of a Eucharistic reading of *Pearl* may be found in John Gatta, “Transformation Symbolism and the Liturgy of the Mass in Pearl” (Modern Philology 71.3, Feb. 1974), 243-256, Rosalind Field, “The Heavenly Jerusalem in Pearl” (Modern Language Review 81.1, Jan. 1986), 7-17, and, most convincingly of all, Heather Phillips, “The Eucharistic Allusions of Pearl” (Medieval Studies 47, 1985), 474-486. The view of the Eucharist as being “extraneous” to *Pearl’s* central concerns nonetheless persists, as may be seen in David Aers, “The Self Mourning: Reflections on Pearl” (Speculum 68.1, 1993), 73.
the York Abraham and Isaac (X), and of aesthetic similarities among the poems of the Pearl-manuscript and the plays of the York Cycle altogether.

Simultaneous Happenings

If the history of critical debate teaches a scholar anything of importance, it is first of all to pursue the understanding of “simultaneous happenings on different levels of life”. The York Cycle and Pearl did not come into existence in isolation, but rather as dramatic and poetic expressions of broader cultural phenomena; and this fact, reaffirmed by the work of many scholars, has encouraged me to cast a very wide net when searching for material evidence of the larger Eucharistic culture which shared influences with late medieval Yorkshire. This study therefore takes into account not only the usual textual sources, but also an abundance of evidence supplied by late medieval liturgy, devotional manuals, stained glass, painted glass, metalwork, woodcuts, stone sculpture, wood carving, ivory carving, and embroidery. Particularly relevant evidence has also been culled from the strong mercantile and cultural relationship between the north of England and the Low Countries in the fifteenth century.

The theory behind such an all-encompassing approach is that one of the best ways to understand drama is to immerse oneself in the cultural conditions of the plays’ creation and

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78 Liturgical texts in medieval England, which bear increasing importance in the chapters to come, included the missal, gradual, manual, processional, breviary, lectionary, antiphonal, psalter, hymnal, and consuetudinary. At least one copy of each survives, with the exception of the York consuetudinary. The York Missal is the chief source of liturgical evidence used in this study, q.v., see William George Henderson, *Missale ad usum insignis ecclesie Eboracensis* (Durham: Andrews & Co., 1874).
79 The principle of selection for any such media is strong evidence of chronological and geographical proximity to late medieval Yorkshire.
reception, as much as that is possible. If one should argue that the York Cycle engages the mystery of the Eucharist in a semiologically complex yet readily recognizeable way, then one must first understand the semiological system within which the plays were written and performed. The Towneley Second Shepherds Play, to give an example of what I mean, presents a rollicking parody of poor Mak’s even poorer Latin: at one point in the play, Mak blesses himself, ostentatiously declaring, “Manus tuas commendo / Poncio Pilato” (384-5).  

The playwright’s joke assumes that the audience has a basic knowledge of Latin; it was a joke which the Towneley manuscript’s Tudor audiences got. Even though Latin was not read widely, it was heard often and understood well enough to stimulate some laughter among popular audiences.

One important way of accessing a culture’s semiological system is by collecting and interpreting an abundance of signs and symbols native to a given work’s time and place. Compare readers of the Towneley Second Shepherd’s Play to readers of the present day, who by and large fail to understand Mak’s sense of humor: modern audiences do not share the cultural climate within which such parodies were connected to the experience of the average person.

Signifiers within a variety of art-forms will not precisely coincide—a Eucharistic allusion in stained glass ‘looks’ different from the way it might sound in poetry—but within a single period such signs will very often carry strong resonances across several media, and in drama in particular there is a certain synaesthesis which inheres in the medium itself. This dissertation therefore pursues evidence wherever it may be found, especially in late medieval liturgy and art.

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81 At the most recent performance of the Towneley Second Shepherds’ Play at the Folger Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C., in December, 2007, not a single person in the theater laughed audibly when Mak solemnly blessed himself with the words, “Manus tuas commendo / Poncio Pilato” (Towneley XIII.384-5). Even modern day ‘cultured’ audiences are in some ways ‘illiterate’ when it comes to medieval semiological systems; or, put another way, the cultural grammar of the Middle Ages in itself needs to be the subject of ongoing study.
In exploring such a wide variety of evidence, my intention is to demonstrate simultaneous happenings on different levels of life, particularly as the York Cycle and *Pearl* manifest dramatic and literary expressions of Eucharistic thought and devotion as reflected in the liturgical and material culture of late medieval England.
Chapter II

Critical and Cultural Context

Although the uses of the York Register may be inferred from internal and external manuscript evidence, records showing the cycle’s performance history nonetheless leave much to be desired. The pageants’ authors and the origin of the annual civic celebration, for example, have always presented many serious if not impossible challenges. The when and where are known, by and large, but the who and what and why of the York Cycle’s authorship and genre and purpose are not known. The simple but difficult fact is that extensive research within the field has turned up only the most obscure records of the York Cycle’s earliest history, while nothing of the plays’ authors is known, except insofar as authorship may be inferred indirectly through the plays themselves. Given so many unknowns, the initial impetus, the playwrights, and the aims of the York Cycle are all wide open to further research, dialogue, and debate. Criticism of the York Cycle and *Pearl* is best understood, furthermore, in terms of the critical problems unique to each, respectively. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to examine key works which constitute the critical context and continuum for this dissertation, works which in turn will prepare the way for the chapters to come.

Leaving aside for the moment the York Register’s later interpolations—York IV, VII, XVIII, and XLVI—each of the remaining extant plays of the York Cycle (including every play discussed in the body of this dissertation) is dated by Beadle on the grounds of scribal hand to the period of the Register’s initial compilation, ca. 1463-77 (with Beadle favoring 1476-77).^{82}

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Manuscript evidence thus places the majority of the play-texts (more than ninety percent of them) about a century after the first and about another century before the last known performance of the plays. The year 1376 in the York A/Y Memorandum Book provides the first known record of pageant-wagons being stored at York. The first known record of the cycle’s processional route, also from the A/Y Memorandum Book, dates to 1399 and indicates that wagons stopped along the route at twelve different stations. The year 1415 yields the first full list of plays, the *Ordo Paginarum*, yet not until as late as 1476-7 is the Register is being compiled by the civic authority. Why at that time did the City of York mandate the creation and keeping of the Register? The plays of the York Cycle had been developing for at least a century, and probably for a little longer still, before they were ever recorded and, after that, they continued to be performed for yet another century, up until ca. 1579. From the earliest known performance to the last known attempt to bring forth the York Cycle, more than 200 years elapsed.

It would be naïve to suppose that playtexts did not exist in what are called prompt copies prior to the compilation of the Register. The century which elapsed in between the first historical record of Corpus Christi pageantry in York (1376) and the later terminus of the Register’s initial compilation (1476) must have seen the comings and goings of many versions of each of the plays in the Cycle. How much the plays evolved over the course of that century is impossible to say, but one can be certain that the York Cycle’s latter century of performance—from c. 1479 to 1579—was much more stable from the standpoint of the text per se. There is no record, that is, of a textual precursor to the Register, no indication that the Register was compiled to replace another version of the same which had perhaps been lost or irreparably damaged. One

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83 The first documented performance took place in 1376; ninety percent of the texts of the manuscript date to 1476; the last effort to bring forth a performance was in 1579.
84 I.e., playtexts owned by the guilds themselves and used for rehearsal and performance.
must assume that the textual tradition was fluid up to a point, and probably until the Register was brought together; but there is little or no evidence to suggest that the playtexts developed much at all after they were copied, and in fact there are indications that the contrary was true, that the textual tradition of the plays stabilized during the latter quarter of the fifteenth century and the first three quarters of the sixteenth century.85

Given the fact that the Register changed so little after its inception, its initial collation and subsequent stability strongly suggest that there was thus an impulse among the City of York’s leadership in the latter part of the fifteenth century to preserve this civic monument from the deleterious effects of time and cultural change. Conservation of this civic treasure was accomplished by literally codifying the City of York’s Corpus Christi Plays, and this codification marks the halt of most the plays’ textual development. Such a move on the part of the most prominent townsmen of York is completely understandable, given that the textual tradition of the pageants, considered either singly or collectively, is presently undiscovered for any period of history prior to the gathering of the playtexts themselves, a fact which in itself justifies the project upon which the civic authority had embarked. After 1476-7, however, we can be almost certain that the plays, which had been copied into the manuscript by that time (i.e., forty-three of the forty-seven extant plays), were checked against live-action performances at the first station of the processional route on Toft Green, probably from 1501 and certainly from 1538.86 Each of the pageants is thus more or less textually stable beginning with the time when each one was entered into the official civic record which has yielded our only surviving copy of the entire cycle.

85 See the discussion on pp. 6 ff. above, “Text and Manuscript Transmission.”
86 See n. 17, above.
The relationship between text and performance is thus crucially important for understanding this dissertation’s critical context and its advancements in the field. The pageants of the York Cycle were meant to be performed by players on a stage acting for a live audience, not merely read in seclusion as a poem would be. The York Cycle was not closet drama. Because of the stability of the Register’s later history, moreover, a high degree of confidence may be placed upon text-based claims about likely staging possibilities in any one of the pageants. It is thus not only possible but also necessary to make claims about the staging of the plays, because the text itself would have been incomplete apart from the performance of it. Given the Register’s purpose and place in the cycle’s performance history, carefully considered and well-made claims about staging may be put forth on the basis of the text itself as compared to its analogues in a variety of cultural-material artifacts.

One would not venture to say, however, that the staging of the pageants would have been nearly as uniform as the text is known to have been from one year to another. In fact, quite the contrary may have been true: it is very likely that annual performances would have varied in terms of costume, blocking, and the delivery or inflection of lines. The fact that the plays were performed annually for upwards of two centuries, considered alongside the fact that spoken lines would have been cross-checked against the Register in a way that staging would not have been, renders inferences about performance very much open to a degree of anchored speculation. Suppositions about staging are at the same time a risky endeavor, on the other hand, and can often be fraught with peril. So if conjectures about staging are to be made responsibly, then at least two safeguards must be kept firmly in place: first, suggested staging possibilities must stand
up to the scrutiny of textual analysis; second, inferences about performance must also stand up to what might be called the double-scrutiny of cultural-historical context.

For the purposes of the present study, it is essential to define and to delineate responsibly and conservatively the precise boundaries of what is meant by ‘cultural-historical context’, and it is also important to articulate how that may be brought to bear on close-readings of plays and subsequent conjectures about staging. The word ‘possibilities’ in itself may be an indication of where such conjectures may lead: the stability of the textual tradition yields a degree of confidence in making claims based on the text itself, while the breadth of cultural context shows the range of possibilities governing any given claim about how a play might have been brought forth on stage. These two components are therefore indispensable to the method of this dissertation, since every claim about the staging of the Corpus Christi pageants or Pearl must stand up to the double scrutiny of cultural-historical plausibility while at the same time remaining founded upon close and careful analysis of the text itself.

Critical Context

Broad studies of cultural context are especially necessary for filling the historical gap between the promulgation of the Feast of Corpus Christi in York (1325) and the date of the only surviving manuscript of the City of York’s annual Corpus Christi pageants (1463-77). The implementation of a methodology founded upon textual analysis within a larger cultural-historical context is a task which is rendered much less daunting by the formidable contributions of scholars whose
work sheds light on the culture of late medieval English and Continental Eucharistic piety. Given the complexity of certain academic and liturgical influences, the cultural-contextual work of Miri Rubin, Carolyn Walker Bynum, Gail Gibson, M. D. Anderson, Clifford Davidson, Lauren Lepow, and Pamela King is indispensable to understanding how the York Cycle’s biblical pageants could have borne substantial textual and performative relevance to the Feast of Corpus Christi. The work of these and other scholars has granted modern readers many invaluable points of access to medieval culture, suggesting among other things that the recognition of Eucharistic allusions in late medieval English drama and poetry is largely a matter of immersing oneself in the signs and symbols of a partially lost, but also partially recoverable, cultural vernacular.

Because a wide variety of scholarly works is applicable to this dissertation’s evidence and conclusions, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to establishing the overarching critical context within which the critical approach of this dissertation might best be read and understood. Four types of study conveniently capture the scholarly contributions relevant to the present work: (i) studies of Eucharistic piety and regional devotion; (ii) studies of biblical drama in relation to piety; (iii) studies which touch upon the Eucharist in biblical drama; (iv) and studies which touch upon the Eucharist in the York Cycle. These categories are ordered within the body of this chapter so as to lead the reader from the general to the particular, with the most specifically relevant critical material appearing at the end of this chapter as a segue to this dissertation’s body chapters’ investigation of individual pageants.

In *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (1991), Miri Rubin has looked at late medieval English and Continental eucharistic devotion

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from the perspective of feministic cultural materialism, arguing that the Church’s purpose in
designing the Eucharist was to construct and deconstruct individuals’ identities in late medieval
society with the express intention of marginalizing women, Jews, and commoners. Utilizing
conceptual models supplied by semiotics and linguistics, Rubin argues that the signs and
symbols associated with the cult of the Eucharist were developed by the patriarchal hegemony
over the course of many centuries in order to centralize social power within the ecclesiastical
hierarchy. She suggests that there was “a symbolic system … designed throughout the twelfth
century”, a language at whose heart was the Host:

The central symbol of this language was the eucharist. The making of this
language was accomplished through emphatic teaching, the symbolic contents and
ritual procedures of which provided the basis of instruction, and to which was
added the suggestion of associated images, acting like trains of associated
thoughts.

(Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 83)

Rubin casts the purpose of devotional manuals in terms of a Jaussian horizon of expectations,
suggesting that “The aim of manuals for the laity, as of all instruction, was to build a *horizon of
images*, a *vocabulary of associations*, which would conjure each other, a train of symbols which

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88 Ibid., 82.
followed from recurrent stimuli created by ritual or by private reading”\textsuperscript{89} in which “signifier and signified dissolved into one”.\textsuperscript{90}

Throughout \textit{Corpus Christi}, Rubin frequently deploys variations on the word ‘design’ in reference to the Eucharist in order to hint at what she perceives as the intentionality, agency, and objects of the doctrine’s aims and ends. So, for example, “The external features of the materials, which were seen and tasted, although their appearance never changed, were a subject of close attention in \textit{the design} of the eucharist”.\textsuperscript{91} In another place, Rubin articulates the extension of this ‘design’ to the clergy: “The priesthood and its life \textit{were designed} as closely as the eucharist”.\textsuperscript{92} The articulation of the Eucharist—its invention, interpretation, and reinterpretation—was “the preserve of the clergy”.\textsuperscript{93} With respect to \textit{exempla} in particular, this clerical preserve becomes “a privileged site for an ethnographic exercise in teasing out areas of conflict and tension within the symbolic system and even, through the disapproving tone and sometimes erroneous interpretation of their teller, for an ethnographic gaze at the living, interpreted, eucharist”.\textsuperscript{94} Such narratives’ purpose, she says, was the marginalization of women, Jews, and rustics\textsuperscript{95} and was “exchangeable for \textit{power}”.\textsuperscript{96} The Eucharist was “the shared element … in whose virtue the orderings and hierarchies were being negotiated and displayed”\textsuperscript{97} through “symbols” which were

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 105, emphasis mine; see also 142; cp. 286 and 344.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 308; cp. 344.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 37, emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 49, emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 70; cp. 82.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 116.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 212, emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 245.
\end{flushright}
“inscribed with local political meanings” specifically meant to subjugate various strata of society to the hegemonic class.

As evidence which confirms the marginalization of Jews, she cites Jews’ vilification in late medieval host-desecration tales. She asserts that women were pushed to the fringes of society by being prohibited from confecting the Eucharist or handling it, and that commoners and lay-people, like women, had only limited access to the Eucharist, and that even this infrequent contact with the Host was always and everywhere controlled and mediated by the ecclesiastical powers’ hegemonic class, the clergy. Rubin concludes that the Eucharist after c. 1000 was received into popular culture in a variety of ways throughout the latter half of the Middle Ages—through the academy, through the clergy and their catechesis of the laity, through host-tales and legends of miracles, by the establishment of a liturgical feast and its subsequent spread, through dedications and indulgences, through preaching and processions and drama, and most of all through the cultural grammar of Eucharistic signs and symbols which permeated late medieval culture and whose meaning was determined by a ruling class of clerics.

Encyclopedic in its breadth and detail, Rubin’s Corpus Christi treats a wide array of topics, beginning with eleventh-century Eucharistic controversies and ending with fifteenth-century heresies. Such a panoramic historical perspective is valuable in its own right: Rubin has effectively catalogued and indexed a very wide scope of historical facts, meandering through such topics as reservation and ritual, Utraquism and Hussitism, heresies and preaching, catechesis, puns, symbol, images, processions, poetry, and drama. The principal debt of this

98 Ibid., 248.
99 Ibid., 255 and 266.
100 Ibid., 128. See also n. 86, above.
101 Ibid., 255 and 266.
dissertation to the work of Miri Rubin is to be found not in her treatment of drama, however, but instead in her exhaustive indexing of cultural expressions of Eucharistic thought and devotion. Although Rubin’s study is fascinating as a work of historical ethnography, its interest with respect to the York Cycle and *Pearl* may thus be found primarily in the myriad examples of late medieval Eucharistic thought and culture which Rubin has diligently uncovered and which are referenced in the body of this study where appropriate.

While upholding Rubin’s view of Eucharistic symbols as signifiers which existed in the late Middle Ages within a larger socio-cultural syntax, this dissertation nonetheless differs radically from Rubin’s work in the nature of its means and ends. *Corpus Christi* treats cultural references to the Eucharist as ‘texts’ in an overarching cultural grammar. For Rubin, Eucharistic images, visual and verbal alike, are all equally ‘utterances’ and therefore need to be studied as signs and symbols in order for their full ‘meaning’ to be grasped within the confines of their late medieval culture’s horizons of expectation. While retaining many of Rubin’s strongest analytical tools—her debt to reception aesthetics, her borrowings from semiotics, and her great appreciation for material culture—this study simultaneously dismisses Rubin’s fundamentally cultural-materialist view of historical evidence and art-historical artifacts, also leaving aside a mode of analysis which seeks evidence of gender and class struggle in fifteenth-century England. Methodologically speaking, this dissertation instead focuses intently on the York Cycle and *Pearl* as dramatic, literary, and historical works of art; any evidence drawn from devotional culture is thus meant to serve the purpose of more fully understanding these texts in their historical and cultural context. Where Rubin’s *Corpus Christi* uses texts to study culture, this dissertation uses culture to study texts.
Employing a methodology similar to this dissertation’s approach, Gail McMurray Gibson has brought a wide breadth of cultural context to bear on select pageants of the East Anglian N-Town Plays in her book *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (1989). As the title implies, her study’s interest is to be found in the interpenetration of theater (public) and devotion (private) in late medieval East Anglian culture. Gibson explores how regional biblical drama was created by, yet also creative of, local devotional practices and schools of thought. Keenly intent on the ostentations of religious observance, Gibson examines devotional theatre not only in the sense in which one usually thinks about that term (by examining specific N-Town pageants within their cultural context) but also from the perspective of what might be called ‘theatrical devotion’, i.e., the ways in which personal piety was expressed in the public sphere. Like the work of Rubin, Gibson’s study is focused primarily on culture rather than texts. Drawing a contrast once again, this dissertation looks at select texts of the York Cycle within their cultural context, yet it does so in the interest of understanding the text itself; while deeper knowledge of regional devotion is the center-piece of Gibson’s study, this study’s center is instead to be found in the culture of late medieval Eucharistic devotion as it found dramatic and literary expression in the staging of the York Cycle and in the theology of *Pearl*.

In a study which combines interest in Eucharistic piety (after Rubin) with a focus on regional devotion (after Gibson), Caroline Walker Bynum examines what she calls “blood piety” in her book *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and*
Beyond (2007). As compared to the work of Rubin and Gibson, Bynum’s look at Eucharistic piety is both topical and regional, focusing most of all on the late medieval reception of the paradox produced by Creator becoming creature in the sacrament of God made flesh, particularly as expressed in the Blood of Christ and its worship in late medieval Wilsnak and in Europe at large. Bynum’s treatment of her topic is meant to counter the tendency among various types of scholar to reduce the Eucharist to the body of Christ and to interpret blood references as referring primarily to Eucharistic piety. Her study aims to discover the medieval practice and theory of blood piety as an entryway into medieval assumptions about broader questions of access to the Divine and eternal through the created and temporal.

Shifting again to late medieval English cycle drama, Miri Rubin has aptly observed that one of the most influential studies is V.A. Kolve’s The Play Called Corpus Christi (1966). Looking at the four major extant mystery cycles—York, Chester, Towneley, and N-Town—as examples of a single coherent genre, Kolve attempts to infer from the cycles’ structural commonalities the isolatable characteristics which might altogether constitute, like the quatrains and couplets of the sonnet, the genre of the Corpus Christi cycle. Since the publication of Kolve’s seminal study in 1966, however, the serial release of the REED volumes has gradually

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104 Ibid., 9-10.
105 For a particularly clear articulation of her study’s purpose, see Bynum, Wonderful Blood, 7: “For behind debates over pilgrimage, relics, eucharist, miracles, and veneration, as behind a piety to which streams or drops of blood were central, lay two closely connected issues: the issue of holy matter, and the issue of access to God or, to put it another way, of God’s absence and presence. How—if matter signifies change and change signifies decay—can God inhere in matter? Yet an incarnate God must so inhere. How—if Christ has gone away in resurrection and ascension—do Christians find him present here on earth? Yet without some presence, some access, there is no point to devotion.” See further articulations ibid., 20 and 256.
107 See Kolve, Play Called Corpus Christi, 1, where the N-Town compilation is referred to instead by its older misnomer, Ludus Coventriae.
given scholars a more and more complete picture of the diverse histories of the mystery cycles, showing just how complex and varied biblical drama was in late medieval England.\textsuperscript{108} As has been discussed above, the major extant cycles were not nearly uniform enough to sustain the weight of a study such as Kolve’s.\textsuperscript{109} Within the wide array of biblical drama, it is in fact doubtful that any such genre as “Corpus Christi drama” ever even existed; and this in turn means that cycles such as those at York and Chester must be thought of instead as civic and regional phenomena, as local rather than as nationwide English celebrations of Corpus Christi through the staging of plays.\textsuperscript{110}

Although the project to establish Corpus Christi drama as a neat and tidy genre has therefore been long left abandoned, Kolve’s structural approach to biblical plays is not without its influence even today. Kolve observes, for example, that the scope of the cycle (as he conceives it, as a genre) correlates to the sequence of the liturgical year as articulated in Caxton’s version of the \textit{Golden Legend}: Septuagesima Sunday narrates the biblical story of Adam, Sexagesima Noah, Quinquagesima Abraham, the Second Sunday of Lent Isaac, the Third Sunday of Lent Joseph, and so on through August, September, October, November, and then Advent and Christmas.\textsuperscript{111} The narrative cycle of the liturgical year, he suggests, provided the

\textsuperscript{108} Compare Rubin, \textit{Corpus Christi}, 273: “All this variety leads us to chip away at some of the schemes which have been developed about the structure and meaning of Corpus Christi drama in England …. To modern scholars the Corpus Christi play is a \textit{type}, a neat and sophisticated structure; but in fact it seems far more changeable over time, sometimes even from year to year, and varied in its many manifestations. It was a living and contingent enterprise” (emphasis in original).


\textsuperscript{110} For a similar observation, see Rubin, \textit{Corpus Christi}, 274: “It now seems more fruitful to view the dramatic enterprises as an expression of local religious culture within the bounds of local political and social relations.”

\textsuperscript{111} Kolve, \textit{Play Called Corpus Christi}, 42-6, and especially 43.
structural basis for the cyclic form of late medieval biblical drama as an aesthetic unity. In *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* (2006), Pamela King has built upon Kolve’s view of the biblical foundations of cyclic structure in order to mount the argument that the York Cycle was a “customised celebration” of the Feast of Corpus Christi. Just as Kolve compares cyclic form to the liturgical year, King’s study uses the liturgical year as the basis for chapter divisions which treat discrete segments of the York Cycle: her study progresses from Epiphany to Septuagesima, then to Quadragesima and Palm Sunday, and hence to Corpus Christi, the Christmas Season, and Holy Week. Kolve’s observation regarding the cycle’s debt to the liturgical calendar thus becomes the template for the structure of King’s study.

King’s work at the same time differs from that of Kolve in significant ways, particularly with respect to cycle and feast. Kolve once observed that “[t]he date set aside for the feast [of Corpus Christi] can vary from May 23 to June 24”, an observation to which he then adds that the feast’s late-spring, early-summer time of year provides “weather for an outdoor festival, and someone somewhere … had the idea to stage a play that day.” Kolve goes on to describe the spring-summer window in the liturgical calendar as a kind of ‘limbo’; from his perspective, that is, there is no essential connection between the plays and the feast, just one very long liturgical ‘gap’ between Lent and Advent which was conveniently filled by the Feast of Corpus Christi.

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113 As I will discuss in fuller detail below, the key difference between her study and the present work is in the mode of argument and analysis: King’s evidence remains at the macro level, whereas this study seeks proof of the same thesis at the level of the line or individual word, with particular attention to how plays might have been staged.
114 See Kolve, *Play Called Corpus Christi*, 46.
115 One can speculate about why Kolve does not see the likely connection of the feast to the York Cycle. To begin with, his project was to write about all of the ‘cycles’, and he did not have access to many of the sources or advances in scholarship which have since that time been made available. The lack of such evidence as the REED volumes is perhaps one thing which compelled Kolve to look at all of the extant cycles (and some which are rumored to have existed as ‘Corpus Christi cycles’ but which have not survived) in order to postulate a universal ‘type’, i.e. the
Pamela King enters the debate at precisely this point, suggesting instead that the celebration of Corpus Christi was the ordering principle which guided the selection of biblical mysteries dramatized in the cycle.

In contradistinction to Kolve, King declares that the object of her book-length study is “to articulate a reading of the [York] Cycle as a celebration specific to the feast of Corpus Christi, rather than a reprise of Christian history located at the time of the feast because the weather was likely to be good and the day long.” Following Kolve and Rubin, King nonetheless approaches Corpus Christi as “the feast of feasts”, as a celebration which in itself recapitulates the entire liturgical year. While this manner of approach is sound at the macro level, King is at pains to demonstrate is how this overall plan would have been recognizable as a celebration of Corpus Christi for the average medieval audience in their reception of individual pageants. She claims, for instance, that “The reading aloud from the Gospel book at Mass, transforming the written to the spoken word as part of the office, was akin to transubstantiation”, and that the cycle of liturgical readings was therefore a cycle of ‘transubstantiations’ or ‘words made flesh’ which on the whole celebrate the mystery which they imitate. Taken on this level, however, any and all biblical drama could be interpreted as being akin to transubstantiation; and such a conclusion, if affirmed, would reopen the discussion of the genre as it was approached by Kolve. This fact substantially weakens King’s otherwise very strong evidence of the importance of liturgy for the
generic features of a Corpus Christi Cycle ‘genre’. The publication of innumerable records, books, articles, and critical editions has since that time shown how and why his methodology was deeply misguided.

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116 See King, York Mystery Cycle, 9.
117 Ibid., 26. Compare Kolve, Play Called Corpus Christi, 42-6, and Rubin, Corpus Christi, 36, where the Eucharist is seen as an arch-sacrament, a mystery containing within itself many other mysteries, and which is therefore ‘open’ to all the mysteries of the liturgical calendar.
118 King, York Mystery Cycle, 34.
cycle, about which she rightly concludes that “dramatists were influenced in a number of ways by the liturgy in the detail of each pageant”.119

Despite the overwhelming evidence showing the extent of liturgical influence upon the York Cycle, King is not able to convincingly apply liturgical parallels in Eucharistic interpretations of individual pageants in a manner which is sensitive to their cultural context. In her analysis of the York Nativity (XIV), for example, she suggests the following interpretation and consequent imagination of staging120:

In the York Nativity pageant, the Virgin Mary is, according to the logic of the piece, a type of priest, able to ‘make God’, the bringing forth that the priest performed sacramentally being what the Virgin achieved physically at the Incarnation. The staging of this episode always presents problems to modern directors …. But if we imagine the episode performed with the Virgin kneeling, her back to the audience, producing the ‘baby’ from where it is concealed in her clothing and then gently but firmly lifting it above her head with both hands while uttering her words of imitation in explicit imitation of the celebrant at Mass, the pageant takes on a very particular resonance.

(King, *York Mystery Cycle*, 23-4)

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119 Ibid., 45. See also the extensive table in 46-7.
Such a reading is problematic because it is rooted in fancy rather than in history or in a survey of late-medieval English art-historical analogues. Among examples of the iconography of the nativity scene contemporary with the York *Nativity* pageant, it is not possible to find a depiction anything like the one described above by King. Such a staging would furthermore have been considered rather unorthodox by contemporary audiences, and could even have been condemned as Lollard or heretical on accounts of its implications for the ordination of women. Even if such a staging were historically plausible, moreover, there still remains the question of the extent to which the York *Nativity* confirms King’s thesis that individual pageants within the Cycle presented “analogies of transubstantiation”.

While putting too much weight on the influence of liturgical texts, King’s study also places excessive pressure on a rather loose understanding of the doctrine of transubstantiation. For King, evidence of the cycle’s customized celebration may be found throughout the cycle in just this way:

The exclamatory greetings which occur specifically at moments when Christ appears seem, in pageants attributable to a number of different hands, to create dramatic moments which are not merely recollective of New Testament history, but which, through paraliturgical mediation, are intentionally analogous to the process of transubstantiation.

(King, *York Mystery Cycle*, 21)
The doctrine of transubstantiation, albeit essential for Eucharistic doctrine and piety, cannot in itself sustain a reading of the York Cycle’s many individual pageants from a Eucharistic perspective. As this dissertation will demonstrate, there is no single pattern or manner of allusion which fits or explains every Eucharistic moment in the Cycle; some such allusions are created by means of typology, others by instances of paronomasia; some are indebted to patterns of popular piety, while still others arise from the whole aesthetic design of a given play or sequence of plays and are recognizable through words, lines, gestures, or staging implied by dialogue. Such allusions’ potential for visual recognition by medieval audiences must ultimately rest on the degree to which the visual accoutrements of Eucharistic piety may be discovered and read against the texts of the plays themselves, a methodological strategy wholly neglected by King but applied generously throughout this dissertation.

What King therefore sets out to demonstrate is that the individual pageants altogether constitute an aggregate celebration of Corpus Christi, but what she is able to show beyond any doubt is that the Cycle is steeped in liturgical hypertext, enmeshed in the interlinkage of readings and antiphons and a wide array of liturgical influences. Her study demonstrates that the York Cycle presents a recapitulation of the liturgical year in time and space compressed into a single day of pageantry, and that this overarching influence of the liturgy may be seen in individual lines of several pageants and in sequences of pageants. What is not clear, however, is how this way of commemorating the feast through drama would have produced “analogies of transubstantiation”, and how those analogies furthermore would have been or could have been visualized and therefore rendered recognizable on stage for medieval audiences, few of whom
(if any) would have carried in their quotidian minds the vast intricacies of the liturgical cycle of feasts and of those feasts’ liturgical texts and intertexts.

The question of precisely what might have been borne about in the minds of the laity had meanwhile been taken up in the mid-twentieth century in a series of studies by M. D. Anderson. In *The Imagery of British Churches* (1955), Anderson looked at medieval churches from a popular perspective rather than from the point of view of doctrine or aesthetics—how preachers used the space, how craftsmen adorned it, how the laity experienced it, how architects laid it out, and finally how and why certain cycles of mysteries from the life of Christ and the Blessed Virgin were laid out in certain places within a church’s overall design. Such a treatment becomes especially important in light of her book-length study titled *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* (1963). This study treats not only mystery plays, but also morality and miracle plays. Anderson even goes so far in her analysis as to propose a scope and structure for the lost Norwich Plays on the basis of the cycle of mysteries depicted in the roof bosses of Norwich Cathedral. Anderson continued a similar line of analysis with her next publication, *History and Imagery in British Churches* (1971), although this work is substantially less relevant to the study of drama than its immediate precursor.

Shortly after M. D. Anderson published on the topic of drama and imagery, Clifford Davidson began calling for scholars of late medieval English drama to look more closely at the art-historical record as a way of informing their investigations. The first such publication was his book *Drama and Art: An Introduction to the Use of Evidence from the Visual Arts for the Study*

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122 Anderson, *Drama and Imagery*, 87-104.
of Early Drama. What followed was a series of publications which, over the course of the next three decades and more, focused ever more increasing attention on the materiality of medieval pageantry. The many works of Davidson are referenced in the body of this dissertation wherever appropriate, but it is worth noting here that the topic under investigation in this dissertation diverges significantly from the type of evidence examined by Davidson: where his works’ interests lie in the materiality of material culture, this study’s investigation leans much more towards textual semantics and semiotics as reflected in material culture.

Cultural-historical Context

What is crucially missing from previous attempts to account for the York Cycle’s relationship to the Feast of Corpus Christi is a fuller conceptualization of cultural context. So although there is a century-and-a-half-long chronological fissure between the first observance of the Feast of

124 Clifford Davidson and David O’Connor, Drama and Art: An Introduction to the Use of Evidence from the Visual Arts for the Study of Early Drama (Kalamazoo: The Medieval Institute, 1977). As he explains in the preface to this volume, the book came into its final form when “Professor Alexandra Johnston asked [him] to provide a list of York art relevant to early drama for the York volume of Records of Early English Drama”, after which the project was separated from the REED volume and became the basis for the Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series sponsored by the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University (Davidson, Drama and Art, iii).


126 The Middle English Pearl here becomes an important piece of cultural-contextual evidence in the study of the York Cycle, as will be discussed in Chapter VI, below. Culture was of course much broader than a single poetic work, as this dissertation attests in its incorporation of a wide variety of examples of Eucharistic devotion in late medieval English material culture.
Corpus Christi in England (c. 1317-25) and the only surviving manuscript of the York Corpus Christi Cycle (ca. 1463-77), the fact is that this lapse in time would have allowed Eucharistic devotion in England to gain a strong foothold and to complete a long cultural ascent which in some ways came to its popular apex in such literary, dramatic, civic, and artistic accomplishments as the York Cycle on the Feast of Corpus Christi and, to a lesser degree, in the composition of such works as *Pearl*. Key questions nonetheless arise naturally from such gaps in the historical timeline. Was the York Cycle designed from its very inception to be a city-wide celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi per se? Or did the York Cycle instead accumulate Eucharistic allusions, symbols, and meanings over the course of the century-and-a-half which intervened between the beginning of the Feast’s celebration in England and the collection of the plays in the York Register? Or is this a false dichotomy, and is it therefore possible that the plays were established as a commemorative celebration, after which time the plays continued to accumulate Eucharistic allusions and images?

Without more direct historical evidence than has survived, it is not possible at this time to determine the precise impetus or inspiration for the York Corpus Christi Cycle’s first performances, and yet one can nonetheless speculate about this. Who decided upon the cycle and determined its scope? Who composed the first plays, and why the City of York decide to assign pageants to guilds and have them performed upon wagons on the Feast of Corpus Christi? Why make this an annual celebration, rather than a one-time event? These questions remain, and probably will remain for a very long time, entirely open to investigation. What may be surmised about the plays, their authorship, and their purpose can nonetheless be known indirectly through the body of surviving textual and cultural evidence. The fact that the York Cycle was always
performed in conjunction with the Feast of Corpus Christi, even from the very beginning to the very end of the Cycle’s documented history of performance, gives strong testimony to the likelihood that the York Cycle was in fact inspired by the celebration of the Feast itself.

It is also likely that the York Corpus Christi Cycle accumulated Eucharistic valences of meaning over the course of the pageants’ history on the stage, and this probability is in no way compromised, but instead substantially supported, by the fact that the civic records themselves refer to the Cycle as the *plaies of Corpus Christi* (or some variation thereof) throughout. What we have in the York Register in terms of evidence is therefore a kind of snapshot, if you will, of the plays as they were performed from the time of their heyday in the late fifteenth century up to the close of their performance history, since we know for a fact that the unique copy of the manuscript was securely in the hands of the civic authority from c. 1463 until 1579. Whatever changes might have occurred in lay-devotional piety after the initial copying of the manuscript, cultural change was not necessarily reflected in the playtexts themselves (omissions and excisions notwithstanding), and yet the northern devotional heritage which is reflected in the Register was itself perpetuated by the pageants for as long as they were performed precisely because the playtexts did not change. Staging, on the other hand, would have been adaptable to both the old and the new, provided that the manner of bringing forth a given pageant—its staging—would have resonated with the spirit and meaning of the texts.

Evidence establishing a fitting context for the plays must therefore have had some degree of cultural currency prior to ca. 1463-77, the range of dates which Richard Beadle assigns for the

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127 The Register’s manner of referring to the plays is consistent, beginning with the first entry in 1376 (“pagine Corporis Christi”) and continuing through the last in 1579 (“Corpus christi play”), q.v., see Johnston, *REED: York*, 3 and 390, respectively.
copying of the unique manuscript of the York Cycle. This in turn implies that cultural-historical artifacts which were created beginning in the fourteenth century and which lasted well into the fifteenth century—e.g., stained glass, painted glass, metalwork, liturgical vessels, xylographic books, illuminations in missals and in books of hours, ivory carvings, stone sculptures, wood-carven misericords—may be regarded as more and more important as they tend to close the chronological and geographical gaps between their own provenance and that of the York Cycle. The consideration of such evidence serves a dual purpose: first, it gives readers of the Cycle valuable access to a lost cultural vernacular; and second, it also serves to fill the gap between the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi and the celebration of the feast in the City of York as recorded in the late-fourteenth century Register. Stained glass from the Great East Window of York Minster dating to ca. 1408, for example, may be regarded as particularly strong evidence of cultural context and may be used to complement careful textual analysis of a pageant or poem. Such an artifact allows for no gap in provenance between the window and the York Cycle: both would have existed in the same precincts at the time of the flourishing of biblical drama in the late medieval City of York; and considering one in light of the other establishes continuity of devotional sentiment some seventy years prior to the dating of the text itself. The strength of such evidence holds even more tightly if it can be shown that textual analysis, art-historical evidence, and broader cultural trends—in this case, iconography which has analogues dating back to the fourteenth century and earlier—all resonate harmoniously.

Of the York Cycle’s forty-seven extant plays, those which have received the most critical attention to date for their Eucharistic allusions are a focused subset of the Infancy Plays—the *Nativity* (XIV), the *Shepherds* (XV), *Herod* (XVIa), the *Magi* (XVIb), and the *Purification* (XVII). One might expect that subjects such as the Last Supper, the Passion, or the Supper at Emmaus might instead have drawn significantly more attention for their Eucharistic allusions; i.e. that the plays most studied in this connection might instead have been the plays which are more directly related to the institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Because the York Infancy Plays have nonetheless been the locus of critical inquiry where the York Cycle’s relationship to the sacramental Body of Christ is concerned, I therefore begin my discussion of the York Cycle’s Eucharistic allusions here, in the middle of the cycle-drama’s narrative arc.

This chapter and the next will argue that the Eucharistic allusions of the Infancy Plays (York XIV-XVII) initiate the reader into the York Cycle’s subtle and complex commemoration of the Feast of Corpus Christi. I aim to show that this group of plays ostends, in the space of four thematically interwoven pageants, the whole narrative ‘type’, the very aesthetic pattern, of the York Cycle’s Eucharistic semiotic. The way in which these four plays signify and dramatize the Eucharist is similar to the way in which the whole of the cycle accomplishes an analogous overarching semiotic plan. Here in the York Infancy Plays, the York Cycle’s aesthetic may be glimpsed in brief, in miniature, in time and space compressed.
A first and necessary step in arriving at this conclusion will be to envision the play’s context, to imagine the scene of the Nativity according to medieval English ways of picturing it. A synopsis of the York Nativity will show significant overlap with analogues in art, while a brief look at studies which have laid the foundation for the present chapter will lead to a detailed consideration of the play itself. Studies published by R. H. Robbins, Leah Sinanoglou, and Pamela King have already brought to light significant evidence in favor of these plays’ Eucharistic allusions.\(^{129}\) Their studies have established the Infancy Plays’ debt to the liturgy and to the cult of the Eucharist, perceptible in verse forms which imitate the generic features of the elevation prayer, a medieval English devotion of the lay faithful at the moment of the major elevation of the Host during Mass. This chapter will draw upon the work of Robbins while affirming and extending significantly the findings of Sinanoglou and King.

Accepting King’s argument that verse imitations of elevation prayers may be found here and elsewhere in the York Cycle, I will show by means of close-reading that the York Nativity (XIV) is much more indebted to medieval liturgy than has been previously thought. Further investigation of historical evidence—formal analysis of stained glass and illuminations, as well as comparisons with the York Missal and northern English metalwork—will likewise show that the York Nativity’s Eucharistic allusions are supported and substantially extended by analogues in art and liturgy roughly contemporary with the play. The Eucharistic allusions initiated by the York Nativity persist almost for the full duration of the York Infancy Plays (The Flight into Egypt, York XVIII, is the lone exception), yet the present chapter will confine its investigation

primarily to the *Nativity* (XIV), the *Shepherds* (XV), and *Herod* (XVIa), thus leaving the *Magi* (XVIb) for Chapter IV and the *Purification* (XVII) for a study outside the scope of this work.

Setting the Stage for the Birth of Christ

Keeping in mind the fact that the York Cycle is not exclusively a literary text—that the text we now have was originally designed to be performed by actors on a stage, with a set, with props, and with a live audience—visualizing the Nativity is therefore an essential first step to close-reading the text of the play. The stained glass window depicting the nativity scene, located in the north chancel chapel in St. Peter Mancroft in Norwich (Fig. 3 below, The Toppes Nativity, ca. 1453-5), combines many of the iconographic elements typical of the late medieval English way of imagining the scene at Bethlehem. Front and center is the Holy Family. Mary, holding the Infant Jesus in her lap, prepares to nurse Him. An angel bears the naked Infant’s swaddling clothes. Joseph shivers in the cold. Shepherds pipe a ditty to their Lord, while in the background the ox and the ass feast on fresh fodder. The scene is canopied by a roof whose state of dilapidation admits the light of the Star of Bethlehem.
In the Toppes Nativity Window, angels bring fresh thatching for the roof of the stables, a trope which appears in England, the Low Countries, and France in the High Middle Ages. Thatching is particularly important for the York Nativity, since the production of this play was traditionally

\[\text{\footnotesize Reproduced from David King, The Medieval Stained Glass of St. Peter Mancroft Norwich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Plate 6.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize For a brief discussion of this motif in late medieval iconography, see Gertrud Schiller, Iconography of Christian Art (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), 81. Examples of angels bringing thatching for the stable-roof at the scene of the Nativity also survive at Barton Turf, Norfolk and at Leicester (see Kerry Ayre, Medieval English Figurative Roundels (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 56, Plate no. 213), as well as in the Netherlands (see David King, The Medieval Stained Glass of St. Peter Mancroft Norwich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), lxxvi, Figs. 32, 33) and in France (see Raymond Cazelles and Johannes Rathofer, Illuminations of Heaven and Earth (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988), 89, fol. 59v.).}\]
the responsibility of the Tile-thatchers Guild.  

Joseph in fact comments on the state of the roof directly, lamenting, “pe ruffe is rayued aboven oure hede, / Als haue I roo” (XIV.18-19).  

The stable’s state of ruin is typologically significant—the angels repair an old roof, which signifies the fulfillment of the Old Dispensation in the advent of the New Dispensation. The presence of the ox and the ass in the background is also meaningful: feasting on Bethlehem’s finest straw, these mild beasts keep vigil in their own way in accordance with medieval custom.  

The York Nativity thus maintains certain elements of the Toppes Nativity, especially in the example of the thatching angels; yet in other respects the play departs from this iconography, especially in Eucharistic ways. By far one of the most important considerations when comparing drama and art is the fact that, whereas art is visually and temporally static, drama by contrast is temporally and spatially dynamic. Taking into account the dynamism of the play, the following discussion will demonstrate that the York Nativity is both like an unlike other nativities of its time and place.

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132 Customary in York was the assignment of pageants to certain guilds, usually according to a guild’s wares or in connection to a guild’s patron. To the Shipwrights was given The Building of the Ark (VIII), to the Goldsmiths The Magi (XVIb), and to the Vintners The Wedding Feast at Cana (XXIIa), for example. For more on the rationale for guild assignments, see Alan Justice, “Trade Symbolism in the York Cycle” (Theatre Journal 31.1, Mar., 1979), 47-58. For twenty-three of the pageants, Justice has been able to establish one or another sort of connection. The Nativity, however, is one of those plays which, he concludes, “must be left without indication as to why they were associated with their producing crafts” (58). The present discussion sufficiently answers the riddle of the York Nativity’s trade symbolism by demonstrating its association with the Tile-thatchers via late medieval iconography.


134 This tradition may in fact be of Franciscan origin. See the Sabbatier Edition of the Speculum Perfectionis as quoted in Regis Armstrong, Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vol. 3 (New York: New City Press, 2001), 363: “…all mayors of cities and lords of castles and villages should be bound to oblige people each year on the day of the Nativity of the Lord to scatter wheat and other grain along the roads outside towns and villages, so that our sister larks and other birds may have something to eat on such a solemn feast … I would add that whoever has an ox and an ass be bound on that night to provide them a generous portion of the best fodder.” Armstrong discusses briefly the reliability of the Sabbatier Edition, the relative accuracy of which would not affect how widespread this tale might have been in the Middle Ages as one misattributed to pen of Brother Leo.
Mary’s Prayer of Adoration

The York *Nativity* opens with Joseph addressing a prayer to the Holy Trinity as he searches for a place to stay the night in Bethlehem. Near the opening of the play, he leaves briefly to “get vs light” (XIV.43), and almost immediately thereafter Mary gives birth to the Christ-child. Straightaway Mary offers the Infant praise. Joseph returns, seeming to be blinded by the light of the scene: he recognizes the Infant as his Lord, is welcomed by Mary, and soon Joseph too greets the Infant with praises. Not until the birth of Jesus do Mary and Joseph seek the shelter of the stables. They then lay the Newborn in a *cribbe* and swaddle Him; in response, the Ox and the Ass genuflect in adoration, Joseph declares the fulfillment of the prophecy of Habbakuk, and the play then closes with Mary and Joseph offering prayers to the Christ-child. The York Nativity lasts only about 150 lines, but it is replete with symbolism in its dialogue and in that dialogue’s implications for on-stage action.

Twelve of the play’s lines in particular (XIV.57-63 and 108-112) have received the majority of critical attention on account of their formal similarity to medieval elevation prayers. Also called the ‘levation prayer’ or ‘elevation lyric’, this type of devotion was often recited by late medieval English lay faithful at the moment of the major elevation of the Host during Mass. The genre has been described in detail by R. H. Robbins in his article, “Levation Prayers in Middle English Verse,” where it is furthermore suggested that elevation prayers in fifteenth-century England were an important forerunner to vernacular liturgy. The elevation prayer,

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Robbins argues, was in fact chief among the practices which the laity relied upon during Mass. Representative of the genre is the following example, which I quote from Robbins:

Hayle Lyfe! Hayle Merci! Hayle Hele! Hayle Pese and Pyte!

Hayle warra Crystys Flesche and Blode.136

The repetition of the word “Hayle” is an instance of anaphora which, Robbins suggests, signals the genre of the levation prayer, particularly when combined with apostrophes to the Word Made Flesh.137 The genre is itself liturgical and devotional in character, though Robbins makes few claims beyond identifying the genre and its characteristics. Robbins’s identification of the genre has nonetheless given an important account for scholars of the York Cycle, most notably for Leah Sinanoglou and Pamela King, both of whom see the genre of the elevation lyric at work in the York Nativity.138

With the publication of Robbins’ article detailing examples and formal characteristics of the elevation lyric, the groundwork had been laid for the development of a Eucharistic strain of scholarship on the York Infancy Plays. Over the course of several decades thereafter, various scholars of fifteenth-century English drama published a series of studies in which the prayers of Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, the Magi, and Simeon (i.e., through almost the entire York Infancy


137 Other commonly used salutations are also typical of the genre. “Welcome”, for example, is one frequently used leading line, as is the phrase, “Welcome in forme of bred”—nuances of the genre which Robbins also describes.

138 See n. 129, above.
Sequence) were subsequently identified as elevation prayers which had been appropriated by the York playwrights and adapted for dramatic purposes.\textsuperscript{139}

At the moment when Mary and Joseph first behold the Christ-child in the York \textit{Nativity} (XIV), each one recites a litany of praises in the form of an elevation lyric; and these lines, I will endeavor to show, are not the end but rather the beginning of the York Infancy Plays’ allusions to the sacramental Body of Christ. The series of allusions begins with the following lines uttered by Mary when she first beholds the Infant Christ:

\begin{verbatim}
 Hayle, my lord God, hayle prince of pees.
 Hayle my fadir, and hayle my sone;
 Hayle, souereyne sege all synnes to sesse,
 Hayle, God and man in erth to wonne.
 Hayle, thurgh whos myght
 All þis worlde was first begonne,
 Merknes and light.
\end{verbatim}

(York XIV.57-63)

Leah Sinanoglu contends that Mary’s prayer, rather than being just an imitation of the medieval elevation lyric genre, is additionally connected to a medieval tradition of Christ-child apparitions.

witnessed at the moment of the elevation, a tradition whose beginnings she traces to the story of the life of Edward the Confessor.\textsuperscript{140}

As Pamela King has observed, “the Virgin Mary the moment she has given birth greets the word made flesh with the words of greeting conventionally uttered at the moment of the elevation of the Host.”\textsuperscript{141} Such a reading of the York \textit{Nativity} naturally supports the claim that this pageant has a Eucharistic focus. In subsequent publications, however, King stretches this reading of the \textit{Nativity} beyond what the available evidence affirms: she suggests, for example, that the scene of Mary’s adoration of the Infant would likely be staged, and perhaps “could only” have been staged, with Mary elevating the Christ-child above her head in “explicit imitation of the celebrant at Mass.”\textsuperscript{142} King simultaneously holds that the York Plays are “orthodox” rather than Lollard—two propositions which are mutually exclusive, given the fact that advocacy for the ordination of women was characteristic of late medieval Lollardy. Regardless of the doctrinal implications of King’s assertion, however, her suggested staging for the \textit{Nativity} must ultimately stand or fall depending on whether such a visual analogue may be found in extant art in Western Europe in the High Middle Ages, and particularly in or around Yorkshire.

In studies which have built upon Sinanoglou’s work, the analysis of elevation prayers has consistently been similar in scope—insightful, yet not evidenced well enough to have implications either for staging or for the plays’ overall aesthetic pattern. Scholars have pointed out that elevation prayers are present, that is, whereas for the most part they have not extended


\textsuperscript{141} See Pamela King, “Instruction on the Sacraments,” 167.

such observations in ways which might give a more complete account of the semiotic range of
the prayers’ presence in the context of the York Nativity and the remainder of the York Infancy
Plays. By comparing the York Nativity to contemporary art and liturgy as a foundation for close-
reading the prayers of Mary and Joseph, it is possible to develop what is already known of the
elevation prayers’ semiological function and so to establish much more precisely what those
prayers’ form and content adds to the play’s Eucharistic symbolism and aesthetic.

Mary’s Prayer Revisited

In her elevation prayer, Mary hails the Infant Jesus in three temporal dimensions, as He who
was, He who is, and He who is to come; past, present, and future time buckle at the moment of
the Birth of Christ, uniting all in a single sacramental moment.143 Mary’s prayer of adoration
recalls prophecies of the past fulfilled in the present, yet her prayer’s prophecy in the present will
itself come to fulfillment in the future in the Passion of her Son. Prophecy and fulfillment work
on yet another level as well: the real fulfillment of actual prophecies is complemented by the
narrative strategy of the York Cycle as a whole, since the cycle’s narrative arc ends with
Doomsday and thus encompasses ‘all time’. Mary’s prayer therefore contains ‘prophecies’ which
the audience will see ‘fulfilled’ in the narrative ‘future’ of the cycle prior to the ‘end of time’, i.e.

143 Compare Stephen K. Wright, “The York Creed Play in Light of the Innsbruck Playbook of 1391” (Medieval and
Renaissance Drama in England 5, 1991), 34, where the Innsbruck Corpus Christi Play culminates in “the
glorification of the Eucharist, the sacrament that abolishes linear history by rendering present the redemptive
sacrifice of God.” See a similar discussion of the abolition of linear time in the medieval understanding of the
Nativity in Gertrud Schiller, Iconography of Christian Art (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), 74 ffl., where Schiller
likewise notes that the buckling of time has a sacramental aspect.
by the end of the day’s drama. Theological prophecy in the play is mirrored by narratological ‘prophecy’ in the cycle.

The viewer experiences momentary confusion when Mary hails her newborn as both “fadir” and “sone” (XIV.58). Given that the human experience of time is linear, the conflation of such seemingly stable categories as antecedent and consequent—father and son—is immediately arresting: Jesus cannot be both “father” and “son” of Mary, both cause and effect. The oxymoron challenges the audience to take the divine view of time, to see space-time as God sees it, and thus to view the simultaneity of past, present, and future as a single sacramental moment.

The Eucharistic dimension of the sacramental collapse of time in the Nativity is nowhere more striking than in the parallel between Mary’s elevation prayer and the antiphon in the York Missal for the Feast of the Nativity, specifically for Mass in the Morning (Ad Missam in Aurora) when jointly celebrated with the Divine Office:

Hayle, my lord God, hayle prince of pees. Lux fulgebit hodie super nos;
Hayle my fadir, and hayle my sone; quia natus est nobis Dominus:
Hayle, souereyne sege all synnes to sesse, et vocabitur Admirabilis, Deus, Princeps pacis,
Hayle, God and man in erth to wonne. Pater future saeculi: cujus regni non erit finis.\[144\]

(York XIV.57-60) (York Missal, Antiphon for the Nativity)

In addition to echoing such key apostrophes as “Prince of Peace” and “Lord God” and “Father”, Mary’s elevation prayer also provides and important situational analogy to the York Missal’s

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\[144\] See William George Henderson, Missale ad usum insignis ecclesie Eboracensis (Durham: Andrews & Co., 1874), 16: “A light will shine upon us today, for the Lord God is born to us: and he shall be called Wonderful, God, Prince of Peace, Father of the future age, whose reign will have no end” (translation my own).
antiphon for the celebration of the Divine Office at dawn on Christmas morning. According to the dialogue of the York Nativity, a bright flash of light accompanies the birth of Christ, signaled by Joseph’s exclamation: “A, lord God, what light is þis / þat comes shynyng þus sodenly” (XIV.78-9). Just as the birth of Christ coincides with a flash of light and is immediately followed by Mary’s prayer of praise, the liturgy for the day likewise begins at dawn with words which recall the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah.

Mary’s elevation prayer thus recalls and in a certain sense fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah—“and he shall be called … Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Is. 9:6). Hers is the privilege of proclaiming the moment of the arrival of the Christ, the looked-for savior who was, who is, and who is to come. Mary’s five-fold salutation, “Hail”, answers the Angel Gabriel’s salutation, “Ave”, while at the same time emphasizing her adoration of Christ in the present moment as Jesus arrives in Bethlehem. Her prophetic exclamation, “Hail, souereyne sege all synnes to sesse” (XIV.59), looks forward to Christ’s redemptive suffering; in the Incarnation, the Infant is already the Man of Sorrows. In this threefold emphasis of Mary’s prayer on past, present, and future time, the metaphor is complete: time itself takes on the aspect of eternity at the moment when Christ the Eternal High Priest enters time itself for man’s redemption.

The collapse of time and space in the York Nativity represents a compression of mysteries, a sacramental-historical coalescence which is likewise typified in an early fourteenth-century stained-glass Nativity window in the Parish Church of St. Mary in Barby, Northamptonshire (Fig. 4). This fourteenth-century window of Midland provenance depicts the Nativity in a manner which bears many affinities to the portrayal implied by the close-reading of
Mary’s elevation prayer above.\textsuperscript{145} The Holy Family appears in the center of the window, Mary in gold and Joseph in green. The child Jesus is before them, lying upon the surface of an altar; he looks up towards them, whereas they bow their heads as though in sorrow. Behind Mary and Joseph are the Ox and the Ass, while above the scene rises the Star of Bethlehem. On either side of the image are angels with wings of gold swinging censers.

Fig. 4. The Barby Nativity Window, Parish Church of St. Mary.

North Aisle East Window. Northamptonshire, ca. 1300-10.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{145} I do not intend, however, to make any claim that one influenced another; I would merely like to suggest, rather, that both the image and the play arose from a common set of sacramental influences and understandings.

\textsuperscript{146} Reproduced from Richard Marks, \textit{The Medieval Stained Glass of Northamptonshire} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Plate 3. Marks notes that the restoration of the window has modified the iconography so that the child Jesus is now on a “bed of straw”, whereas he used to be “on the altar / manger” (16). The Eucharistic symbolism is thus intensified by the inclusion of wheat in the restoration, but because the altar is original glass we can be certain that the Eucharist is a key feature of the window’s original (i.e., unrestored) symbolism.
The Infant upon the altar with censing angels on either side suggests a collapse of time and space which is also characteristic of the York Nativity (XIV). The window, itself situated in situ above an altar, implies that those who attend the sacred liturgy are also present at the event of the Nativity. The sadness of Mary and Joseph, and perhaps of the Ox and the Ass as well, implies that the Passion is also foreshadowed here. The past of the Nativity and the future of the Passion are united in the presence of the Sacrament of the Altar.

Thus the Eucharist becomes one multi-layered reply to Anselm’s famous question, Cur Deus homo? As Gertrud Schiller suggests in her general analysis of medieval Nativity iconography, after the Council of Lateran IV in 1215, “both liturgy and theological writings show that the two events of Christ’s life—his Birth and Death—were regarded as one.” Schiller goes on to assert that “the Birth of Christ is repeated or represented at worship in the sacrament,” that is in the Sacrament of the Altar. The Christ-child rests therefore upon an altar, recalling the traditional medieval apologetic in which the Bread of the Eucharist is substantially the same as the Body of Christ born at Bethlehem. The angels swinging censers on either side are vested in pure white liturgical albs and cinctures as though acolytes. To complete the analogy, the viewer himself is therefore present in the very stables at Bethlehem while participating in the sacred liturgy, and that participation is itself a foretaste of the Eternal Mass.

The principal commonality between the Barby Nativity and the York Nativity is each one’s treatment of time in relation to sacramental mystery. Various other aspects of the pictorial narrative are nonetheless strikingly different in many ways. Markedly different from the York

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147 I reiterate that the original glass does not include the bed of wheat upon which the Christ-child is laid, although this restoration certainly enhances the window’s Eucharistic symbolism. See also n. 71.
149 Ibid., 74.
150 The window itself is furthermore situated immediately above an altar, intensifying the correlation. See Marks, 16.
Nativity, Mary and Joseph in the Barby Nativity wear grief-stricken expressions, covering their faces with their hands. The Ox and the Ass seem almost to be howling at the Star of Bethlehem in the background. Contrasted against the happily feasting beasts of the Toppes Nativity and the elated parents at York, the window at Barby leaves an unsettling impression. Why such sadness on such a joyous occasion? The answer may be in the medieval understanding of the Eucharist as a mystery which renders accessible that which is otherwise beyond human reach—eternity.

The glaziers’ iconographic choices affect the viewer with somber sorrow at the scene, rather than with excitement and joy. As Gertud Schiller suggests in her discussion of medieval nativity iconography, “the knowledge that God had to humble himself on account of human guilt [leads] men to contemplate the poverty into which he had entered and the consequent grief of created nature,” a fact which in turn “contrasts with the joy over the redemption of man’s own guilt.” Whereas joy over the redemption is apparent in the Toppes Nativity, at Barby on the other hand there are no shepherds piping joyous tunes; emphasis lies instead upon the more philosophically-minded question, Why did God become man?

The bittersweetness which thus characterizes the Barby Nativity Window affects the viewer above all with a vivid pictorial affirmation of the integral unity of the Incarnation and Passion in the mystery of the Eucharist. Mary and Joseph’s grief-stricken expressions lament the past, present, and future kenosis implied by the birth of Christ. No single mystery is captured here in temporal or spatial isolation, that is to say; three mysteries are instead overlaid or enfolded into one, thus forming a new and inseparable unity which is both like and unlike each

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of its discrete components. Incarnation, Passion, and Eucharist—these three mysteries collide in time and space in a mystery in which the viewer can participate.

Additional aspects of the pictorial narrative at Barby create a strong sense of visual acoustics, reechoing the tripartite unity of these mysteries even in the lesser details of the image’s iconography. Mary wears a golden overcloak atop a green robe: her golden overcloak recalls the salutation of the Angel Gabriel, *Ave, gratia plena*, while the greenness of her undercloak symbolizes the perfection of nature by grace. Her brilliant blue halo meanwhile looks forward in time to the Coronation. Joseph, dressed in a green overcloak atop a golden undercloak, is a naturally virtuous man with a proleptic glimmer of the grace of the redemption. Even the window’s tracery is significant, its outline forming a trefoil which further emphasizes the three mysteries suggested by the image’s iconographic elements. The one graceful arch which rises directly overhead almost completes the outline of a *fleur-de-lis*, a symbol which is often associated in the Middle Ages with the iconography of the Annunciation.

The scene at Barby collapses time, space, and eternity into one: its component parts signal, manifest, and expose the mystical unity of Nativity, Passion, and Eucharist, each as part and whole. Space-time is represented in a manner completely different from its depiction in the Toppes Nativity. To bring the discussion back to York, I would like to pose here the question whether the York *Nativity*’s depiction of the scene is more temporally static, as in the example of the Toppes Nativity, or else more temporally multi-faceted, as in the depiction at Barby. Judging solely by Mary’s praise of the Infant (XIV.57-63), it would be impossible to establish whether York’s depiction of the mystery of the Nativity may be linked to the Eucharist in any other way than by one or two allusions imitating the outer form of devotional prayers. Yet a sustained
investigation of the remainder of the play’s dramatic elements will nonetheless show that both the form and the content of the York Nativity imply a holistic and thematic connection to the Eucharist from beginning to end.

Joseph and the Beestes Mylde

The moment of the Birth of Christ is veiled from Joseph’s sight in the York Nativity—Joseph momentarily leaves the Virgin “to get vs light” (XIV.43). A different excuse is given in the Infancy Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, where Joseph leaves instead to find midwives. Typologically speaking, Joseph’s momentary absence in search of light recalls Adam’s absence at the moment of Eve’s temptation. When Joseph returns to find the Christ-child born of the Virgin, his surprise counterbalances the grief of the Fall with the joy of the Incarnation. Eve tempts Adam with the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and Adam returns in sorrow; Mary on the other hand initiates Joseph into the mystery of the Incarnation, offering him the fruit of her womb and welcoming him with joy to the scene of the adoration of the newborn Body of Christ.

To complete this Eucharistic typology, Joseph confesses to Mary his faith in the mystery into which he has just been initiated, declaring with wonder, “Wele is me I bade þis day / To see

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152 See M. R. James, The Apocryphal New Testament (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), 74, and particularly the Liber de Infantia or Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew: “Joseph was gone to find midwives and brought Zelomi and Salome.” The York Nativity seems to combine the excuse for Joseph’s absence with the emphasis on light found in the vision of St. Brigid of Sweden, an important textual influence on late medieval English Nativity iconography.
his foode” (York XIV.90-1). Probably the most direct allusion to the Eucharist in the play, Joseph’s use of the word *foode* in reference to the Christ-child—particularly given Mary’s elevation prayer—can hardly mean anything other than exactly what it appears to mean: Joseph thanks God for the grace of having lived to see the “food” of the Eucharist, the Christ-child laid in a manger in the stables at Bethlehem. The moment when Joseph first beholds the Infant, he prays a prayer which looks very much like Mary’s prayer in York XIV.57-60:

Hayle my maker, hayle Crist Jesu,
Hayle Riall kyng, roote of all right,
Hayle saueour.
Hayle my lorde, lemer of light,
Hayle blessed floure.

(York XIV.108-12)

To Mary’s litany of praises may therefore be added Joseph’s prayer of adoration, likewise modeled on the medieval genre of the elevation lyric. Where Mary’s prayer emphasizes prophecy and its many temporal dimensions, Joseph’s prayer of adoration emphasizes instead the static symbolism of the Christ-child’s many titles—Maker and King and Savior, but also *roote* and *floure* and *lemer of light*. The play’s emphasis on light, compounded with the play’s proximity to the Chandlers’ *Shepherds* (York XV, the very next play), furthermore suggests that

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153 See Robert E. Lewis, ed., *Middle English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), s.v. “foode.” *Foode* being the root of the Modern English *food*, it meant in Middle English primarily what it means in today, food. One secondary meaning which has since passed out of usage, however, is the definition of the word *foode* as ‘child’ or ‘creature’. The *MED* nonetheless holds that the primary definition of the word was indeed ‘food’.
the wares of the candle-makers might have played some practical or symbolic part in the way the scene was staged. Had the set of the Nativity in any way been fashioned after the likeness of a church with an altar, the presence of candles would have added greatly to the symbolic association of the Christ-child with the Eucharist.

The York Nativity also dramatizes the miracle of the adoration of the Ox and the Ass. Rather than consuming their accustomed abundance of fine hay as in the Toppes Nativity Window (Fig. 3 above), the beasts in the York Nativity move out of the background and into the foreground, at the center of the action. The following lines spoken by Joseph indicate the visual and symbolic importance of the moment when the Ox and the Ass genuflect in adoration:

JOSEPH  O Marie, beholde þes beestis mylde,
They make louing in there manere,
As þei wer men.
Forsoth it semes wele be ther chere
Þare lord þei ken.

MARIA  Ther lorde þai kenne, þat wate I wele
They worshippe hym with myght and mayne.

(York XIV.122-28)

154 Compare also the vision of St. Brigid of Sweden: “I saw the child in her womb move and suddenly in a moment she gave birth to her son, from whom radiated such an ineffable light and splendor, that the sun was not comparable to it, nor did the candle, that St. Joseph had put there, give any light at all, the divine light totally annihilating the material light of the candle” (qtd. in Schiller 78, emphasis mine). Cp. the medieval English tradition of the elevation candle, which when combined with the reading presented above becomes quite an interesting staging possibility.

155 See Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, ed., Legenda Aurea (Firenze: Sismel, 1998), 71, for the primary textual influence for this gesture—*Bos igitur et asinus miraculosae dominum cognoscentes flexis genibus ipsum adoraverunt*—“Thus the ox and the ass, miraculously recognizing the lord, adored Him on bent knees” (translation my own). Cp. the Middle English version in Richard Hamer, ed. *Gilte Legende*, EETS No. 327 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 38: “And thanne the oxe and the asse knewen oure Lorde bi miracle and worschipped hym vpon her knees.”
What is often pushed off into the background is here center-stage; what might have otherwise been part of the set has come to life and is now part of the dramatic action of the play. The Ox and the Ass, representatives of created nature, are literally and metaphorically ‘moved’ by the sight of the Incarnation. Similarly touched, Mary describes how the beasts try to warm the Body of Christ in the cold. The scene implied by the dialogue is emotionally captivating—Creator and creature, meeting face to face:

    MARIA  The wedir is colde, as ye may feele,
            To halde hym warme þei are full fayne
            With þar warme breth,
            And oondis on hym, is noght to layne,
            To warme hym with.

            (York XIV.129-33)

It is difficult if not impossible to say how medieval audiences might have received these lines and their dramatization on stage. From a modern vantage point, the image is paradoxical and tantalizing, magical and unnatural—creatures nurturing their Creator, the divine just within reach, yet remaining both untouched and untouchable. Given the emotional power of this scene, one cannot help but wonder whether analogues might have existed in the art and culture of Western Europe in the High Middle Ages.
There is at least one fifteenth-century analogue for the York Nativity’s depiction of the beasts in adoration: the famous Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry lends a full-page illumination to an episode pictorially recounted there from the life of St. Anthony of Padua (Fig. 5 below). The tale belongs to a genre of exempla used by medieval preachers to persuade the faithful to believe in the Real Presence. St. Anthony, preaching the doctrine of the Eucharistic presence in a public square (variously said to have been in Bourges, France or in Rimini, Italy), placed a tantalizing choice before a famished mule—whether to eat fresh hay on the one hand, or else to adore the Lord’s Real Presence in the Host. The mule, preferring to worship its Lord in the Sacrament rather than to consume the fresh hay, so astounded the people of the town that they all began to believe in the Eucharist on account of St. Anthony’s living exemplum or ‘quick book’. The story implies that even an ass is clever enough to recognize its Lord.\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{156} Paraphrased from P. D. Luigi Guidaldi, ed., The Little Flowers of Saint Anthony of Padua: from a fifteenth-century vernacular version of the Liber Miraculorum (George D. Smith, trans., London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, Ltd., 1936), 6-8; and from Benedict Groeschel and James Monti, In the Presence of Our Lord: The History, Theology, and Psychology of Eucharistic Devotion (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997), 221-2: “In a dramatic confrontation with a man who refused to believe in the doctrine of the Real Presence, [St.] Anthony [of Padua] took the bold step of carrying the Eucharist into a public square, where the man’s horse, having been deprived of any nourishment for over two days, was tested to see whether he would turn his attention to an inviting pile of fresh hay on one side or rather to the sacrament in Anthony’s hands; ignoring the hay, the horse went down on its knees before the Eucharist.”
In the *Très Riches Heures* the inscriptions above and below the image of the mule in adoration are quoted from the introductory invocation of the Liturgy of the Hours—*DOMINE LABIA MEA APERATURES ET OS MEUM ANNUNCIABIT LAUDEM TUAM*, etc. This evidence indicates that this image might have been intended as an everyday beginning-point for the Divine Office, which itself could very well have been a preparation for daily Mass. Although the Duke of Berry’s book of hours was admittedly commissioned for a single wealthy magnate and not for the poor masses, the story of St. Anthony might nonetheless have been popular in any locale where there were Franciscans in medieval England. Given the documented influence of Franciscanism in York, it is

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158 “Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.” *Deus in ad.*” also appears in the frame—the beginning of the rest of the introduction to the Divine Office, “Lord make haste to help me.”
tempting to hypothesize that the reception of the York Nativity might likewise have been influenced by just such a tale of miraculous adoration. The beasts’ miraculous affirmation of the lay faithful’s sometimes tenuous belief in the Real Presence is an idea to which the York dramatists, whether acquainted with the tale of St. Anthony or not, certainly make dramatic appeal through the adoration of the Ox and the Ass within the larger context of Mary and Joseph’s lyrics of greeting modeled formally on Eucharistic elevation prayers.

The York Nativity and the York Missal

Having explored various extensions of the Eucharistic allusions of the York Nativity, and also their interpretive and semiotic range, it remains to be seen whether any argument may be made for each allusion’s part in the context of the whole. Does the York Nativity have an intrinsically Eucharistic meaning, for example, or is this simply a case of a few discrete components of the play—a handful of lines here or there—subtly hinting at Eucharistic symbols which are themselves not central to the play’s meaning? The next section of this chapter will draw on

159 Friar William Melton, OFM, “Professor of Holy Pageantry” (sacre pagine professor), is in fact credited with one of the most important changes in the history of the York Cycle, for it was his preaching which, in 1426, compelled the civic authority to move the Feast of Corpus Christi back by one day specifically so that the lay faithful might obtain the many indulgences offered for the observance of the Liturgy of the Hours and Mass for Corpus Christi as promised by Pope Urban IV at the time of the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1264. For the full documentation of Fr. Melton’s influence, see the York A/Y Memorandum Book, fols. 278-8v (6 June, 1426), in Alexandra Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, eds., The Records of Early English Drama: York (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 42-4. Also see See Francis Drake, Eboracum: or, The History and Antiquities of the City of York (York: T. Wilson and R. Spence, 1788), 316: “Those faithful in Christ, who attended at morning service at the said feast of the church where it was celebrated, an hundred days; those at the mass, the same; those also, who came to the first vespers of the said feast, the like an hundred days; the same in the second; to those also, who were at the first, third, sixth, and ninth compleutory offices, for every hour of those, forty days; to those also, who attended service on the octaves of the said feast, at mattins [sic] or vespers, mass, or the aforesaid hours, an hundred days for every day of the said octaves.”
previous observations and present further evidence in order to suggest that the York Nativity’s Eucharistic allusions might not simply be marginal, isolated embellishments, but instead part of a larger Eucharistic design for the entire play of the Nativity (York XIV).

The York Nativity’s allusions do not end with the elevation prayers of Mary and Joseph, nor even with the Adoration of the Ox and the Ass. Not just in its narrative middle but also in the play’s opening and closing there exist additional indications of the play’s indebtedness to the liturgy. Near the end of the play, Joseph recites one final, parting prayer to the newborn Infant, who has just been laid in a cribbe on-stage. I quote here the two most pertinent lines of Joseph’s five-line prayer: “And lord, to thy service I oblissh me / With all myn herte, holy” (XIV.146-7). Not conspicuous in themselves, these lines become attention-grabbing when Mary repeats almost exactly the same words just a few lines later: “And to thi service I oblissh me, / With all myn herte, entere” (XIV.151-4). Such repetition, in drama as in poetry, demands a second look.

Closer inspection reveals that the words of Mary and Joseph as they lay the Infant to bed are in fact a translation into Middle English of the prayer recited inaudibly by the celebrant at the close of the Mass in the York Missal. This prayer, known as the Placeat tibi, immediately follows the reposition of the Blessed Sacrament, according to the rubrics of the York Missal. Considering the context for Mary and Joseph’s prayers in imitation of the Placeat tibi, the lexical analogy is also situational, like the antiphon which nearly accompanies the flash of light earlier in the play. Mary and Joseph, having just placed the Christ-child in a cribbe (XIV.118)—i.e., having just placed the Body of Christ in an attitude of repose—close the play of the Nativity with words very similar to those uttered last of all by the celebrant at Mass.
The rubrics of the York Missal are therefore relevant as well, since the situational parallel between the close of the Mass and the close of the York *Nativity* has implications for staging possibilities. The rubrics of the York Missal direct the celebrant of the Mass to pray “with body inclined, with hands joined, in a quiet voice facing the middle of the altar”—*corpora inclinato, junctis manibus, tacita voce coram medio altaris*. Such a posture would likewise have been fitting and natural for Mary and Joseph in the staging of the York *Nativity*, albeit true that current evidence gives little indication of whether such a blocking for the scene would have been favored by medieval directors. However tenuous might be such speculation regarding stage-directions, there can nonetheless be little doubt about the York *Nativity*’s debt to the text of the York Missal. Mary’s words signaling the close of the York *Nativity*—“Thy Handemayden forsoth am I, / And lord, to thy service I oblissh me”—are remarkably similar to the words which signal the end of the Mass in medieval York after the repose of the Eucharist: *Placeat tibi, Sancta Trinitas, obsequium servitutis meae*, the latter portion literally translating into Middle English as, *to thi service I oblissh me*.

Given the accumulated evidence presented above, it is perhaps meaningful as well that the play begins with Joseph’s invocation of the Trinity, “All-weldand God in trinite” (XIV.1). Many plays in the York Cycle open with a prayer to God, but only the *Nativity* opens with an apostrophe specifically to the Triune God, which may well be derived from the introductory rites of the Mass. Whatever the status of the play’s first line, there can be little doubt that the York *Nativity* manifests a sustained interest in the parallel between the mystery of the Nativity and the mystery of the Eucharist. The next section of this chapter will demonstrate that the York Nativity manifests a sustained interest in the parallel between the mystery of the Nativity and the mystery of the Eucharist. The next section of this chapter will demonstrate that the York

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161 Ibid.
Nativity’s sustained Eucharistic focus is carried into the next several plays—the Chandlers’ Shepherds (XV), the Masons’ Herod (XVIa), and the Goldsmiths’ Magi (XVIb).

The Eucharist in the Infancy Plays

The plays which follow in the ‘order of plays’ continue to employ the pun on the word *foode* which was initiated in the York Nativity (XIV), thus extending the Eucharistic allusions as a constant theme throughout the next several plays. The play of the Shepherds (XV), which follows the Nativity, opens with the *pastores* recalling prophecies of the Christ-child’s birth. The First Shepherd recalls the prophecies of Hosea and Isaiah in anticipation of the Annunciation (XV.6-10) and the Nativity (XV.11-12). The Second Shepherd recalls the Zoroastrian prophecies (of “Balaam”) and the importance of the Star of Bethlehem (XV.13-16). He also prophesies the Passion to come (XV.17-20) and the Virgin Birth (XV.21-24). All of this is to say that these characters are not the shepherds of Towneley’s famous Second Shepherds Play—these are not the rollicking and ridiculous Mak and Col, nor the swindlers and the rascals of a mock pastoral.¹⁶²

The First Shepherd is the first character, but not the only one, to use the word *foode* in reference to the Christ-child at Bethlehem. An apparent play on the expectations of the pastoral genre, the shepherds are looking for a good meal when they first appear; but given their long

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recollection of prophecies from various sources, the audience hardly mistakes the Shepherds’
puns for their apparent or literal meaning:

An aungell brought vs tythandes newe
A Babe in Bedlam shulde be borne,
Of whom þan spake oure prophicie trewe—
And bad us mete hym þare þis morne—
Þat mylde of mode.
I walde giffe hym bothe hatte and horne

And I might fynde that frely foode.

(York XV.72-8, emphasis mine)

Just as Joseph refers to the Christ-child as food in the York Nativity (XIV.91), so too does the
First Shepherd refer here to the Infant as food. In this instance of the same pun, however, there
is added the adjective frely, meaning noble. The two words together—frely foode—form a new
signifier: as a phrase, this combination of words could have meant either “noble child” or
“sumptuous feast”… or perhaps in this case it could have meant both things at once. The play
appropriates a pastoral trope for theological purposes; specifically for a Eucharistic equivocation,
that is. The First Shepherd seeks a “noble child” who is also a “sumptuous feast”, an expression
which, given the context, constitutes a literal metaphor.163 The audience, having been introduced
to the equivocation of “food” and “child” in the Nativity, simply follows the pun from the

163 The First Shepherd’s pun might have carried even greater resonances with the audience, given its placement
between two songs celebrating the Nativity, one of which almost certainly would have been the Gloria in excelsis
Deo, the ordinary part of the Mass which is drawn directly from the narrative of the Nativity.
previous play into this play, and from here the pun continues into the play to come, the Masons’  
*Herod* (XVIa).

Whereas the primary significance of the Shepherd’s pun is clearly Eucharistic, the pun which occurs in *Herod* is much less so, even though it relies upon the same word, *foode*. Context is the factor which in each case determines how the word is to be understood, but context here is determined by the whole Infancy Sequence rather than by lines appearing either immediately before or after the word *foode*. In *Herod*, the word *foode* occurs in the immediate context of the *miles* or soldiers praising and flattering the king. Herod has set himself equal to the very pantheon of the ancient Roman gods, emphasizing in particular his ability to cast down even knights and kings (an enjoyable irony, since the Magi and the King of Kings are all about to escape Herod’s grasp). So the First Soldier’s comparison of Herod to a “lodsterne on hight” (XVIa.24) blasphemously mocks the bright Star of Bethlehem, whose light has figured prominently in the previous two plays, and whose symbolism will also be important in the play to come. In this context, then, the First Soldier swears to Herod, “Sir, what foode in faith will you feese, / þat sott full sone myselfe sall hym sesse” (XVIa.40-41). If the twofold significance of the word *foode* in the *Shepherds* leans more towards the literal “food”, the same word’s literal significance in *Herod* leans much more towards “child” or *bearn*, although in either instance the word brings to the table the rich ambiguity of both meanings.

Until now, no scholar has yet interpreted this series of Eucharistic puns as an affirmation of a sacramental reading of the entire York Infancy Sequence as an aesthetic unity. As this chapter has demonstrated in a variety of ways, Eucharistic allusions in the plays of the *Nativity* (XIV), the *Shepherds* (XV) and *Herod* (XVIa)—particularly on account of how subtly
suggestive those allusions can be—demonstrate a consistent semiotic pattern of how Eucharistic imagery operates on a lexical level throughout the Infancy Plays as a whole. The First Shepherd stands in contraposition to the First Soldier, for example, as witness to the Eucharistic mystery at Bethlehem; both “seek” the foode of the Eucharist, but the Soldier is the persecutor of that mystery, that foode. Joseph’s declaration of faith in the foode he finds at Bethlehem will eventually be echoed by the Magi (XVIb). In fact, the unity of the Infancy Sequence is nowhere more clearly evident than in these plays’ culmination in the next play in the sequence, the play of the Magi. The Magi’s Eucharistic lauds are so rich and historically rooted that the next chapter will be devoted to a full-length treatment of them.

The Nativity in the Mass

The Nativity as a symbol for Eucharistic epiphany had by the fifteenth century been securely established through a tradition of academic debate which had also found its expression in art. The Nativity’s Eucharistic connection is expressed directly in the example of the Swinburne Pyx (Fig. 6 below), whose lid’s inner surface is decorated with an engraving of the Nativity scene (Fig. 6, right) and whose inner bowl bears the image of the face of Christ (Fig. 6, left).
The pyx was purchased by the Victoria and Albert Museum from Mrs. L. G. Swinburne of Northumberland in 1950, and it is thought that the pyx prior to that time had been in the family’s possession since the Middle Ages. One of only a handful of surviving fourteenth-century English pyxes, the Swinburne Pyx demonstrates that the association of the Nativity with the Eucharistic presence extended even to the work of medieval English silversmiths. The allusions of the York Cycle’s Infancy Sequence were in other words part of a broader tradition in which the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Eucharist, the Nativity and the Mass, were seen as aspects of the one mystery of communion with God through liturgy.

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165 See the Official Website of The Victoria and Albert Museum. Stable URL: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O128706/pyx-unknown/> Accessed 17 December 2012.
Within the Swinburne Pyx, consecrated hosts would have been kept atop the image of Christ (Fig. 6 above, left), with the depiction of the Nativity immediately facing (Fig. 6 above, right). Had the pyx had been used in a small private chapel, as the curators of the Victoria and Albert Museum suppose it would have been on account of its small size, then the juxtaposition might even have been visible to the lay faithful as well. Whether by *intentio auctoris* or by *intentio operis*, the equivalency is certainly there: the very fact of the pyx’s practical function suggests an ontological identification between the Consecrated Host, Jesus the Christ, and the Infant at Bethlehem.

The many examples above, drawn from the history of art and liturgy, indicate to readers of the York *Nativity* a variety of important things about the play’s cultural milieu. Depictions of the Nativity in stained-glass, in metalwork, in liturgy, and in drama all make substantial use of Eucharistic imagery. The Eucharist is very much present in the medieval English imagination of the Nativity, that is. The York *Nativity* therefore presents not an isolated and rarified example of idiosyncratic and recondite allusions; it presents instead a re-affirmation of widely recognized symbolic associations which articulate, in the same semiotic mode as the Barby Nativity Window and the Swinburne Pyx, an array of Eucharistic signs and symbols, the comprehension of which relies on the reader’s ability to perceive the metonymic parts of the Eucharistic whole.

The Eucharist most excellently unites past, present, and future time; the mystery of the Blessed Sacrament unites in a potent way the mysteries of the Nativity, the Mass, and the Passion. This is what may be termed the Eucharistic semiology of the York *Nativity*: the discernible juxtaposition of discrete mysteries in an aesthetic pattern which succeeds by foregrounding metaphorical literalities while at the same time maintaining literal metaphorics. If
there is a discernable ‘typology’ at work in the York *Nativity*, it is that the Nativity is a ‘type’ of the Mass, and that the Mass is therefore the ‘antitype’ *par excellence* of the mystery of the Nativity. The dramatist’s depiction ultimately combines, compresses, fuses, and unites apparently disparate moments in linear time into one sacramental present.
The York plays of *Herod* (XVIa) and the *Magi* (XVIb) were the shared responsibility of the Masons and the Goldsmiths from ca. 1432 until the Register was compiled in ca. 1463-77, which is how it came to happen that two separate originals for this narrative were submitted for the official record, one having been handed in by each of the two guilds. The Masons’ original parallels that of the Goldsmiths from the time when the Magi first make the acquaintance of Herod until moment of the Magi’s hasty departure in search of the Infant Jesus (XVIa.272). Herod farewells the Magi, declaring as he makes his exit, “Go we nowe till þei come agayne / To playe vs in som other place” (XVIa.267-8). Although there is significant overlap between the two originals, the Goldsmiths’ text at this point breaks from that of the Masons, going on to enact the moment of the Presentation of the Gifts of the Magi (in XVIb.273-392). In the left-hand margin, written in a later hand, there appears the following description of stage movement: “The Herrode passeth, and the iij kynges commyth again to make there offerynges.” This latter portion of the York Magi, the Presentation of the Gifts which comes down to us uniquely from the Goldsmiths, is the central concern of the present chapter.

Implied by the history of this play’s two originals is that there is something in the play of the Presentation of the Gifts which could only have been properly performed by the Goldsmiths. The Three Kings would probably have been attired as any king should be, with every sort of lux-

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-ury; and yet, those same kings would have been in dialogue with Herod in the previous play. What therefore sets the Three Kings’ Presentation of the Gifts apart from the earlier action? This chapter will explore just this question, focusing especially on the moment when the Three Kings bring their gifts to the King of Kings at Bethlehem. Bearing in mind both symbolic and practical concerns, I mean to investigate in this chapter what might have been the likely semiotic expanse or reach of the Gifts of the Magi, the event’s whole meaning to its medieval audiences.

The Kings and the Critics

To say that the Three Kings’ prayers addressed to the Infant at Bethlehem are imitations of Eucharistic elevation prayers is not to say anything particularly new about the York Magi. Leah Sinanoglou, Pamela King, and Lauren Lepow, respectively, have all discussed the Eucharistic allusions of the Three Kings’ prayers, particularly as their form relates to medieval audiences’ probable associations with medieval liturgy. These three scholars, who altogether have contributed the most to the present understanding of the Three Kings’ presentation of gifts, have identified a rich association which is now open to much more detailed exploration.

In reference to the Eucharistic dimension of York XVIb, Sinanoglou was the first to emphasize the close tie between the prayers of the Three Kings in the York Magi (XVIb.309-

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and the medieval *topos* of the Christ-child as sacrifice. Sinanoglou suggests that such a trope might even have influenced the play’s staging:

The [third] Wiseman’s greeting the child as food for Christians is perhaps implied as well in the word ‘fode’ so often applied to the Infant Jesus in the Cycle Plays. … Then too, the identity of Child and divine Bread could have been suggested through staging. In the liturgical nativity plays, the manger was placed on the high altar and the officiants grouped themselves around it.

(Sinanoglou, “Christ Child,” 504)

Following Sinanoglou’s lead, Pamela King has noted the Eucharistic potential of the Three Kings’ elevation prayers. She observes, for example, that “in the speech of the Second King [XVIb.321-332], we seem to have another one of those paradoxical utterances about the nature of Christ, as that which requires to be fed, as feeder, and as food itself.” In a more recent book

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169 One thing is problematic about Sinanoglou’s assumption: she appears to take for granted the idea that the early medieval tradition of paraliturgical drama (“the liturgical nativity plays”) might have exerted a direct cause-and-effect type of influence on late medieval pageantry, a vexed question which is itself a subject for extensive debate. Leaving this aside, however, her observations about the textual and iconographic tradition are still valid. See Leah Sinanoglou, “The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the Corpus Christi Plays” (*Speculum* 48.3, 1973), 504. Cp. Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, Vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 8: “Deacons standing behind the altar address as *pastores* two cantors standing in front of it, in the choir. The stage-setting, then, if one may use so ambitious a term, is the altar itself.” See also Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l’Art Chrétien* (Paris: Universitaires de France, 1957), II.219: “In French art of the 12th century, the crèche is often replaced with an altar. This innovation has been explained as intending symbolically that from his birth, Jesus was destined to sacrifice himself for the good of man. One would be tempted to see, moreover, the influence of the liturgical drama of Christmas where we know that the crèche was placed on the high altar illumined by a star which they made to glide along the length of a cord” (translation courtesy of Marlene Brown).

170 See Pamela King, “The York Corpus Christi Plays and the Feast of Corpus Christi: A Reconsideration” (*Medieval English Theatre* 22, 2000), 25; cp. Leah Sinanoglou, “Christ Child,” 504, where an attempt is made to expose the connotative range of the word ‘fode’: “The word could mean either ‘food’ or ‘one who is fed’ but in this context may very well carry the resonance of both meanings.”
on the York Cycle and its relationship to the Feast of Corpus Christi, King holds to this reading and adds the following observation:

In lay contexts Epiphany is important as Christ’s first manifestation of the contrast between earthly and heavenly power, but it was also and primarily the annual occasion for gift-giving, ceremonially associated with the offertory of the Mass.

(King, *York Mystery Cycle*, 109)

The locus of Pamela King’s interest in the York *Magi* is in the play’s apparently subtle reflection of a Eucharistic principle of selection for the entire cycle. Rather than moving up and out to the universal as King has done by suggesting that the macro-structure of the cycle is indebted to the liturgical calendar and therefore celebrates the Eucharist, this chapter (and indeed this entire study) instead pursues on the level of close-reading the fundamental tenets of Sinanoglu’s and King’s respective conclusions within the broader sphere of cultural milieu.

The work of one more scholar is worth mentioning here, even though her studies have focused primarily on the Towneley Cycle and therefore run parallel to this study without directly intersecting with it. As Sinanoglu and King have done for the York *Magi*, so Lauren Lepow has

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171 See Pamela King, *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 109; cp. King’s previous article, “The York Corpus Christi Plays and the Feast of Corpus Christi: A Reconsideration” (*Medieval English Theatre* 22, 2000), 25. In neither of these two publications does King argue that such paronomasia implies a Eucharistic design for the entire play of the *Magi*, nor does King make any such claim about the whole Infancy Sequence in its extended use of “fode” as a Eucharistic pun. King also does not discuss the prayers of the other two kings, nor what the iconography of medieval Epiphany scenes might add to a Eucharistic reading of the play—all questions which this chapter will take up and attempt to answer.
done for the Towneley *Oblacio magorum* (Towneley XIV).\(^{172}\) The prayers of the Magi in Towneley do not maintain the equivocation on *foode* which is so often employed in the York Cycle, yet their prayers may nonetheless be seen as being Eucharistic on account of their form if not their content, since these too are modeled after medieval elevation lyrics. Perhaps the absence of any direct textual allusion to *foode* accounts for Lepow’s understated appraisal of the lyrics’ Eucharistic implications:

... [T]he kings’ ‘Hail’ anaphora once again recalls to the audience their own participation in the liturgical moment of the elevation .... Social and historical distances dissolve: the kings become the spectators’ pastors as they too are recognized as the officiants at Mass.

(Lepow, *Enacting the Sacrament*, 92)

It is not clear just what Lepow intends when she says “officiants”, although she makes an intriguing suggestion here which has vast implications for staging.\(^ {173}\) The work of Lepow, King, and Sinanoglu has thus been suggestive but not conclusive. What remains to be seen is whether contextual evidence drawn from cultural milieu might shed more light on the Three Kings’ presentation of the gifts to the Christ-child in the York *Magi* (XVIb).

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\(^{173}\) In the same place Lepow elaborates only slightly: in reference to the Magi she writes, “priestlike they are, but not aloof regal powers” (*Enacting the Sacrament* 92). Although Lepow is not prepared to make the argument that the Magi were vested as priests or as “officiants at Mass” in the Towneley *Oblacio Magorum*, her argument is lacking only the necessary contemporary pictorial or documentary evidence to corroborate the implications of her remarks.
The Kings’ Prayers of Adoration

The prayers themselves which have earned the York *Magi* so much critical attention (York XVIb.309-344) in connection to the Mass may serve as the best possible starting point for the body of this chapter. First glance shows that these prayers’ language is very carefully structured. Common to all three prayers are certain formal features: each one is twelve lines long, and each uses the word “Hayll” exactly four times; the three altogether use the word “Hayll” precisely twelve times, and each prayer-lyric has the rhyme-scheme *abab abab abab cdcd*.¹⁷⁴ Each prayer-lyric’s *volta* or turn is marked by a change in end-rhyme at each prayer’s line 9, combined with some variation on the word “since” at the beginning of the line—*sith, sythyn*, and *sen* for the First, Second, and Third Kings respectively.¹⁷⁵ All three prayers are marked throughout by strong alliteration.

The Three Kings’ prayers’ formal features suggest a high degree of deliberate and careful use of language. The First King brings *golde*, the Second *insens*, the Third *mire*, in accord with the liturgical tradition.¹⁷⁶ Although the First King does not address the Christ-child in an obviously Eucharistic way, the other two kings do. The Second King welcomes the Infant in the opening line of his prayer as *foode þat thy folke fully may fede* (York XIVb.321), while the Third

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¹⁷⁴ Although this rhyming feature may not at first seem important, these three groups of twelve lines apiece nonetheless stand out, since this is the only place in the play where the rhythm of the play’s twelve-line stanzas is not interrupted by alternating parts in the play’s dialogue. The three prayers therefore have a sense of unity and duration which is lacking in any other part of the play.

¹⁷⁵ One is tempted to speculate that the three distinct forms of the word ‘since’—*sith, sythyn*, and *sen*—might perhaps imply that the Three Kings are coming from different parts of England and are thus speaking different dialects. There is no indication in *The Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*, however, that such dialectal distinctions can be made crisply, although the form *sen* is certainly predominant in the north rather than the south of England. See Angus McIntosh, *Linguistic Atlas*, I.364.

¹⁷⁶ Symbolizing kingship, divinity, and humanity, respectively. See the York Missal, Sequence from the Second Day of the Octave of the Epiphany, in Henderson, *Missale Eboracensis*, 32: “Frankincense signifies that he is God, gold that he is a great king, and myrrh that he is a mortal man” (translation my own).
King addresses the Christ-child in the fifth line of his prayer as *man þat is made to þi men mete* (York XVIb.337). Given the degree of deliberation which has gone into the language of the prayers of the Three Kings, it is all the more important that two of the three prayers allude to the Eucharistic ‘fode’ which the Magi seek at Bethlehem. I reproduce all three prayers below for ease of reference. Notably Eucharistic lines appear in italics, as does the turn of each prayer with the use of the word ‘since’:

I Rex  Hayle, þe faireset of felde, folke for to fynde,  
Fro the fende and his feeres faietefully vs fende;  
Hayll, þe best þat shall be borne to vnbynde  
All þe barnes þat are borne and in bale bende.  
Hayll, þou ma[ke] us þi men and ma[r]ke vs in mynde,  
Sen þi might is on molde missis to amende.  
Hayll clene, þat is comen of a kynges kynde,  
And shall be kyng of þis kyth, all clergy has kende;  
And sith it shall worþe on þis wise,  
Thyselffe haue [I] soght, sone, I say þe,  
With golde þat is grettest of price;  
Be paied of þis present, I pray þe.

177 It is perhaps worth noting that Clifford Davidson renders ‘mete’ as ‘mette’ in his edition—see Clifford Davidson, *The York Corpus Christi Plays* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011), XIV.338. Beadle’s edition, on the other hand, favors ‘mete’, with the explanation that ‘mette’ appears interlinearly in the York Register. The facsimile edition appears to favor Davidson’s rendering of the text—see *The York Play: A Facsimile of British Library MS Additional 35290, together with a facsimile of the Ordo Paginarum section of the A/Y Memorandum Book* (Leeds: University of Leeds School of English, 1983), fol. 72v. Beadle’s choice could also be a matter of spelling variations, however, as *The Middle English Dictionary* lists ‘mette’ as a variation on ‘mete’, or ‘food.’
II Rex  *Hayll, foode pat thy folke fully may fede,*

Hayll, floure fairest, þat neuer shall fade,

Hayll, sone þat is sente of þis same sede

Þat shall saue vs of synne þat oure syris had.

Hayll mylde, for þou mett to marke vs to mede,

Off a may makeles þi modir þou made;

In þat gude, thurgh grace of thy Godhede,

Als þe gleme in þe glasse gladly þow glade;

And *sythyn* þow shall sitte to be demand,

To helle or to heuen for to haue vs,

Insens to þi seruis is semand.

Sone, se to þi suggettis and saue vs.


III Rex  *Hayll, barne þat is best oure balys to bete,*

For oure boote shall þou be bounden and bett;

Hayll, frend faithfull, we fall to thy feete,


*Hayll, man þat is made to þi men mete,*

Sen þou and thy modir with mirthis ar mette;

Hayll, duke þat dryues dede vnder fete,

But whan thy dedys ar done, to dye is þi dette;

And *sen* thy body beryed shal be,
This mire will I giffe to þi grauyng.

The gifte is noght grete of degree—

Ressayue it, and se to oure sauyng.

(York XVIb.309-44)

Because it has been established in critical discourse that these prayers’ “Hayll” anapohora represents an imitation of medieval elevation lyrics, I will confine my remarks at present to other features of each prayer.\(^{178}\) The prayers themselves, however, are thematically united to their form and should be understood in their totality within the context of the observation that their form imitates the generic features of the medieval elevation lyric.

The First King’s prayer emphasizes the Christ-child’s noble birth, making for a natural segue into the theme of kingship, symbolized by gold. Between the initial salutation and the presentation of his gift, the First King also quotes the Psalm which reads, “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” (Ps. 8:5a; York XVIb.313). The other half of the same verse, the half which the First King does not recite, also comes to mind: “or the son of man that thou visitest him?” (Ps. 8:5b). Almost as though in reply, the Second King in turn presents his gift of frankincense to the “sone þat is sente of þis same sede” (XVIb.323)—the Son of Man, that is—and immediately he professes his faith in the Christ-child’s ability to forgive sins (cp. Matt. 9:6). The Second King’s Eucharistic salutation—“Hayll, foode þat thy folke fully may fede” (XVIb.321)—appropriately seems to incorporate his address to the Christ-child as “seed” (cp. Jn. 12:24), which draws something of a contrast to the prayer of the Third King.

\(^{178}\) See notes 169-172, above.
With the Second King having presented his gift to honor the Infant’s *Godhede* or divinity, the Third King now comes to present his gift of myrrh. From the beginning, his prayer’s focus is on the Passion; even his Eucharistic salutation—“Hayll, man þat is made to þi men mete” (XVIa.347)—is a grim prediction of the *Mortificacio Christi* (XXXVI), the York play sponsored by the Butchers. Where staging is concerned, one therefore cannot help but wonder: was there any way in which the Goldsmiths’ wares might have been used in the staging of the play in order to express all of these varieties of symbolism—kingship, divinity, and salvific mortality—while also expressing the prayers’ arguably Eucharistic character? Semiotically speaking, so much depended on staging that, without a staging which could complement the prayers of the Three Kings in precisely this way, it would be difficult to argue that the York *Magi* was centrally concerned with the sacramental Body of Christ. Pursuing just this question, I turn now to the sphere of late medieval English intellectual and devotional milieu.

Intellectual Milieu: *Biblia Pauperum*, Eucharistic Vessels, and Painted Glass

The above close-reading of the York *Magi* does not in itself represent a sufficient investigation of all of the surviving evidence; more may be brought to bear on the present inquiry. Close-reading, after all, often calls to mind larger historical questions, as is the case here. So I turn to cultural and intellectual milieu in order to establish the wider context within which the York *Magi*’s Eucharistic allusions were likely to have been received. I begin with the popular fifteenth-century ‘Bible of the Poor’ or *Biblia Pauperum* (BL Blockbook C.9 d.2), whose
detailed wood-carvings bear iconographic similarities to the art of the late medieval English Midlands. Altogether, such evidence has compelling implications for the relative importance of the two Eucharistic allusions of the York Magi.

According to Albert Labriola and John Smeltz, British Library Blockbook C.9 d.2 may reveal a “more popular outlook” on the medieval depiction and interpretation of biblical mysteries in general, which is exactly the sort of context needed if one is to understand the full range of semiotic implications which make up the cultural context of the York Magi. The Biblia Pauperum as reproduced below (Fig. 7) was first printed in the Netherlands in ca. 1460, but as far back as the thirteenth century there were versions of it circulating in manuscript. The earliest copies printed from woodblocks date to ca. 1400, and the latest printings were popular well into the fifteenth century and beyond. In terms of both popularity and proliferation, the Biblia Pauperum’s apogee would have coincided almost perfectly with the dating of the surviving text of the York Cycle, ca. 1463-77.

As far as the York Cycle is concerned, it is not possible at this time to posit any direct influence of the Biblia Pauperum on the pageantry of the cycle or on any of its individual playtexts. My introduction of the Biblia Pauperum as comparative material is not meant to be an attempt to make any such argument for direct or detectable linear influence; instead, I introduce it here because it is worth it to weigh such evidence in order to hypothesize common influences among the Biblia Pauperum and the York Magi, and perhaps even among the Biblia Pauperum

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179 For a brief discussion of the blockbook’s popular appeal, see Labriola and Smeltz, Biblia Pauperum, viii.
180 See Avril Henry, Biblia Pauperum: A Facsimile and Edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 4. Albert C. Labriola and John W. Smeltz date their facsimile of BL Blockbook C.9 d.2 (reproduced in part below in Fig. 9) to ca. 1470 (see Labriola and Smeltz, viii). I have followed A. Henry’s earlier dating.
181 See Henry, Biblia Pauperum, 4.
and the York Cycle altogether. The hypothesis that there could be shared symbols among this popular blockbook and York’s popular drama would be corroborated by a wide variety of art-historical artifacts known to have been influenced by the *Biblia Pauperum*—the blockbook is known to have influenced late medieval English stained-glass in Lincolnshire and Worcestershire, stained glass in King’s College Chapel and Chartres Cathedral, as well as medieval Flemish ivory carving, and a number of images which originated in Utrecht in the late fifteenth century. The stained glass in St. Martin’s, Stamford, copies precisely Moses’ wellspring sprung from a stone (Num. 20:11) from the *Biblia Pauperum*, while Samson bearing away the Gates of Gaza is copied from the *Biblia Pauperum*, with almost the same degree of precision, in stained glass at St. Martin’s and in a misericord in Ripon Cathedral.

Given its broad circulation, its documented influence on late medieval English glazing, and its widespread production and circulation, the *Biblia Pauperum* may be regarded as a particularly strong source of contextual evidence for the devotional culture of late medieval England. It also offers an additional kind of relevance to the York Cycle, since the *Biblia Pauperum* was the only widely circulated blockbook to contain only biblical scenes, and because the scope of those scenes is so similar to the range of the York Cycle’s total design (i.e., from the Fall of the Angels to Doomsday), and because the *Biblia Pauperum* is thought to have been circulated in manuscript prior to its xylographic mass re-production ca. 1460. Scholars therefore

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183 Both were influenced by a deeply typological thought-process which may ultimately be described as cyclic. See Fig. 2 and Chapter VII of this dissertation for a fuller treatment of typology and cyclic aesthetics.
have a number of reasons to prefer the *Biblia Pauperum* as a source of popular cultural contextual evidence in late medieval England.188

All such details may best be brought to a point, finally, by several studies which have documented York’s strong relationship of cultural and mercantile exchange with the Netherlands in the fifteenth century. There is evidence, for example, that there were many resident aliens from the Low Countries living in York through ca. 1470, at the very time of the *Biblia Pauperum*’s apogee of production and distribution, and coinciding also with the time of the compilation of the York Register.189 The *Biblia Pauperum* might therefore be able to establish for readers of the York Cycle a historically grounded set of possibilities for the iconography of biblical scenes as conceived in late medieval England. The ultimate judge of such shared influences is, however, the degree to which correspondences may be confidently postulated, and that of course is a matter of comparing carefully the art-historical evidence with what may be fairly surmised on the basis of any given play text itself and its known history.

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188 Although the *Holkham Bible Picture Book* contains a depiction of *Joseph’s Trouble About Mary* (cp. York XIII), which might in turn make it appear a better text for comparison to the York Cycle, the *Holkham Bible* is nonetheless inferior as a source of contextual evidence. Called by its facsimile’s editor, Hassall, the *Biblia Divitium* (43), *The Holkham Bible Picture Book*’s date is quite early (c. 1325-1330; see Hassall, 27) and its target audience the rich few rather than the poor masses (see Hassall, 43), which implies of course that its production was less and its circulation less far-reaching. This is not to say that the *Holkham Bible* is a ‘bad’ source of evidence—indeed, Kolve has given several reasons why it is quite a good one (see Kolve, *Play Called Corpus Christi*, 38); but for the reasons outlined above, the *Biblia Pauperum* is much to be preferred.

189 See King, “York Plays and the Feast of Corpus Christi” 14, where her interest in this connection is in establishing “the voguishness” of participating in the Corpus Christi Plays; see also Meg Twycross, “Some Aliens in York and their Overseas Connections: up to c. 1470” in *Essays in Honour of Peter Meredith*, ed. Catherine Batt (*Leeds Studies in English* NS 29, 1998: 359-80); and see, finally, Nicholas John Rogers, *Books of Hours Produced in the Low Countries for the English Market in the Fifteenth Century* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis: Cambridge University, 1982). It is very likely that merchants and resident aliens from the Low Countries would have brought with them such artifacts as the *Biblia Pauperum*; and, had they done so, it is possible that those very depictions which influenced so many other arts in England may have influenced drama as well, especially given that sixty-eight of the eighty-eight mayors of York in the fifteenth century were mercers (see Tillott, *History of Yorkshire*, 71).
What is thy rede?

The next page features an excerpt from the *Biblia Pauperum* (sig. c, Fig. 7) depicting the Epiphany. The typological arrangement of the page is yet another example of the medieval layering of signifier upon signifier: David and Abner appear on the left, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba on the right and, juxtaposed in between, the Adoration of the Magi appears in the center. Directing attention to the Magi, their interaction with the Child King is the obvious visual center of the entire page. Non-essential elements have been stripped from the iconography of the Epiphany, lending greater weight to each remaining aspect of the scene. No shepherds appear, no train of followers, no regal retinue; not even Joseph is present. Like York XVIb, the scene is pared down, simplified. The Madonna and Child receive the Magi under the shelter of the thatched stables; the Three Kings approach with the Star of Bethlehem behind them in the sky. The King in the foreground is the First King who, having set his crown at the feet of Jesus, kneels and presents his gift of gold. The Second and Third kings follow behind, the Second with a conical vessel and the Third with a vessel shaped like a small, angular house.
Fig. 7. *Biblia Pauperum* (sig. c). The Gifts of the Magi.

BL Blockbook C.9 d.2. Netherlands, ca. 1460.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Reproduced from A. C. Labriola and J. W. Smeltz, *The Biblia Pauperum: A Facsimile and Edition of the British Library Blockbook C.9 d.2* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1990), pl. c. LEFT: 2 Samuel 3:19 fll.: “We read ... that Abner, the leader of the army of Saul, came to David in Jerusalem to restore to him all the people of Israel who were following at that time the house of Saul. This even prefigured the coming of the Magi to Christ to adore him with mystic gifts” (Labriola and Smeltz 101). RIGHT: 1 Kings 10:1-13: “We read ... that when Queen Saba, a Gentile, had heard of the fame of Solomon, she came to Jerusalem with precious gifts to honor him. This incident correctly prefigured the Gentiles journeying from afar with gifts to worship the Lord” (trans. Labriola and Smeltz, 101). The Queen of Sheba notably brought Solomon gifts of gold, spices, and gems (1 Kings 10:1). BOTTOM VERSE: “Christ is adored; gold, frankincense, and myrrh are placed before Him” (trans. Labriola and Smeltz, 101).
Close inspection reveals that the vessels brought by the Three Kings are quite different from the vessels carried by the Queen of Sheba. Her gifts balance neatly the iconography of the Epiphany, but they also provide a meaningful contrast, indicating just how deliberate was the selection of the gifts of the Magi. The Queen of Sheba brings gold, frankincense, and precious stones to King Solomon (Fig. 8; cp. 1 Kings 10:1-13), typologically signifying the oblations of the Magi. The gifts of the Magi in turn signify Christ’s kingship (gold), divinity (frankincense), and humanity (myrrh)—Thure Deum praedicant, auro regem magnum, hominem mortalem myrrha. In the Biblia Pauperum, however, the Three Kings bring to Jesus at Bethlehem specifically Eucharistic vessels—a monstrance, a pyx, and a ciborium (Figs. 9 and 10).

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191 See the York Missal, Sequence from the Second Day of the Octave of the Epiphany, in Henderson, Missale Eboracensis, 32: “Frankincense signifies that he is God, gold that he is a great king, and myrrh that he is a mortal man” (translation my own).

192 See the published catalogue of a 1975 exhibition at Harvard University’s Busch Reisinger Museum, Eucharistic Vessels of the Middle Ages (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977), Figs. 9, 16, and 20. Compare the conical pyx in Fig. 12 (above) to The Godsfield Pyx (Victoria and Albert Museum M.360-1921, English, ca. 1350-1400), an example which closely shares the soft, rounded features of the pyx depicted in BL Blockbook C.9.d.2.
Each vessel had a discrete set of uses in medieval Eucharistic devotion: the monstrance was used especially in Eucharistic processions, the pyx for Eucharistic reservation, and the ciborium to bring Holy Communion from the altar to the communicants at Mass. The more pressing question is not so much what the Kings are carrying, but rather … why? Why bring Eucharistic vessels to the Christ-child?

One possibility is that the Biblia Pauperum’s visual allusion to the Eucharist reflects the same theological understanding which is expressed lexically in the York Magi (XVIb.321, 337). This possibility is rendered more likely by the fact that the York Missal draws a direct analogy between the gifts of the Magi and the Blessed Sacrament in the Secret for the Second Day of the Octave of Epiphany:

\[
\text{Ecclesiae tuae, quaesumus, Domine, dona propitius intuere: quibus jam non aurum thus et myrrha profertur, sed quod eisdem muneribus declaratur, immolatur, et sumitur, Jesus Christus Dominus noster.}
\]

(York Missal, Secret for Epiphany)\(^{193}\)

In the York Missal as well as in the Biblia Pauperum, type gives way to antitype: the gifts of the Magi become the oblations of the Church, the Eucharist. It therefore comes as no surprise that a similar theology was reflected in medieval continental pageantry. M. D. Anderson has observed, for example, that “an early play from Limoges directs that the Kings shall offer their gifts in gilt

\(^{193}\) See Henderson, Missale Eboracensis, 33: “Look with favor on the offerings of thy church, O Lord, in which are no longer brought forth gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but rather him who, by these same gifts, is signified, immolated, and received, Jesus Christ our Lord” (translation my own).
cups” which were probably just such liturgical vessels. Given the larger cultural context, the Eucharistic allusions of the York *Magi* (XVIb.321, 337) were likely to have been performed and received within a similar array of types and antitypes influenced by a theology which was mediated through contemporary medieval liturgy. If the scene had been staged so as to highlight the sacramental dimension of the kings’ prayers, it might have been as simple as placing Eucharistic vessels in the hands of the Three Kings.

It is therefore worth considering how the York *Magi*’s Eucharistic allusions might have been staged, given the cultural milieu within which the play took shape. In a similar vein, Theresa Colletti and Gail Gibson have suggested the possibility that a chasuble depicting the mystery of the Nativity might have been “donned by Symeon” in the play of the *Purification* at Wakefield (Towneley XVII), and M. D. Anderson has argued in another place that early performances of the *Officium pastores* probably would have featured “clerics vested in copes or dalmatics.” I do not wish to propose here that such vestments were used in the York *Magi*. I would like to suggest instead that the evidence which survives in vestments from the Midlands can add dimensionality to our understanding of the devotional environs of the plays and performances themselves. Such evidence can furnish fitting analogies of devotional theology.

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195 See also Chapter III of this dissertation, which documents just such an influence of contemporary liturgy on the York play of the *Nativity* (XIV).
196 See Theresa Coletti and Gail McMurray Gibson, “The Tudor Origins of Medieval Drama,” in Kent Cartwright, ed., *A Companion to Tudor Literature* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 239-40: “It is useful to imagine just such a vestment [as the Priest’s chasuble from Whalley Abbey], designed for symbolic interaction with the bread and body of Christ … being donned by Symeon of the Towneley Purification play as he follows the angel’s instructions to go to the temple, where he will see the long-awaited body of the infant Messiah.”
The vestments below—a chasuble and two copes—are three such examples of the famed *opus Anglicanum* or ‘English embroidery’ which was very much sought-after by the wealthiest and most powerful magnates in Europe during the fifteenth century.

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**Fig. 11.**
The Chichester-Constable Chasuble
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Accession Number: 27.162.1
English, ca. 1330-50

**Fig. 12.**
The Vic Cope
Museu Episcopal de Vic
Catalog No.: MEV 1430
English, ca. 1350-75

**Fig. 13.**
The Butler-Bowdon Cope
Victoria and Albert Museum
Museum Number: T.36-1955
English, ca. 1330-50

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From bottom to top: The Annunciation, the Epiphany, and the Coronation.

199 Also called the Cope of Ramon de Ballera, named for the man who was Bishop of Vic from 1352-77.


Center, from bottom to top: The Epiphany, the Nativity, and the Coronation.

200 Reproduced from the official website of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Stable URL:
It is likely that all three vestments have come from the same workshop; curators at each of the 
three museums which house these textiles are in agreement, that is, that each work comes from 
late medieval England and dates to the middle of the fourteenth century. The Chichester-
Constable Chasuble in particular (Figs. 11 and 14) was in the possession of Burton Constable of 
Yorkshire as late as 1559. This chasuble, like the Butler-Bowdon Cope and the Vic Cope, 
presents a cycle of three or more mysteries. Two of the three vestments present the Annunciation 
on the bottom frame, with the other vestment presenting instead the scene of the Nativity. All 
three vestments reserve the central frame for the Presentation of the Gifts of the Magi, and each 
one’s iconographic representation shows a strikingly similar composition. In each case, the Three 
Kings’ vessels are more like those found in the Biblia Pauperum’s Adoration of the Magi (Figs. 
11 and 12) than they are like those carried by the retinue of the Queen of Sheba (Fig. 8). To what 
extent, though, might the vessels carried by the Three Kings in these vestments be described as 
liturgical or Eucharistic? The images reproduced below show the relevant details of each of the 
three vestments.

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93441/cope-unknown/. Center, from bottom to top: The Annunciation, the 
Epiphany, and the Coronation. See also Donald King and Santina Levey, The Victoria and Albert Museum’s Textile 
Collection: Embroidery in Britain from 1200-1750 (New York: Canopy Books, 1993), 41, Fig. 14. 
201 For the full discussion of the chasuble’s provenance, see the official website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. 
Stable URL: http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/170006579.
Each vestment depicts the moment when the Christ-child receives the gift of the First King. A closer look at the First King in each of the figures above (Figs. 14-16) reveals a strongly uniform iconography. In each, the First King presents his gift of gold in a chalice-like vessel. The Christ-child receives this gift as he stands upon the lap of his mother, Mary, with arms outstretched to receive the offering. With the Christ-child in her lap, Mary sits atop a cushioned altar which is decorated in an architectural style. Once again, in each example the vestiture of Mary and Jesus is very elaborate, expressing the Kingship of Christ and the Queenship of Mary. In the Chichester-Constable Chasuble in particular, the Christ-child extends his hand in blessing. Given the chalice-like shape of the First King’s vessel, and the regal vestiture of Mary and Jesus, and the placement of the Christ-child upon an altar, it appears that the extension of the Christ-child’s hand in blessing over the First King’s offering intends to place special emphasis on Christ’s royal and eternal priesthood.\textsuperscript{202}

\textsuperscript{202} A similar theological emphasis in fact characterizes the Feast of Corpus Christi, whose office composed by Thomas Aquinas was given the title \textit{Sacerdos in Aeternum}. 

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Fig. 14. The Magi. Detail.
Chichester-Constable Chasuble
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Accession Number: 27.162.1
English, c. 1330-50

Fig. 15. The Magi. Detail.
The Vic Cope
Museu Episcopal de Vic
Catalog Number: MEV 1430
English, ca. 1350-75

Fig. 16. The Magi. Detail.
The Butler-Bowdon Cope
Victoria and Albert Museum
Museum Number: T.36-1955
English, ca. 1330-50
Keeping in mind that vestments were created for use in the liturgy, the placement of the King’s offering on the back-facing side of the Chichester-Constable Chasuble means that this scene would have faced the lay faithful for the duration of Mass. The scene would have carried special symbolic significance at the major elevation of the Host, furthermore, since this was the part of the medieval Mass which most closely parallels the moment of the First King’s offering. Such a parallel is crucial for the present investigation, because the prayers of the Three Kings in the York *Magi* (XVIb.309-44) have been composed in a manner which reflects the influence of medieval elevation lyrics.²⁰³

The accumulated evidence presented above has thus connected to medieval liturgy the Presentation of the Gifts of the Magi in York XVIb.309-44, the Epiphany page of the *Biblia Pauperum* (sig. c), and three late medieval liturgical vestments from the Midlands (Figs. 14-16). Such a variety of evidence demonstrates an awareness of the Epiphany’s relationship to liturgy in the minds of various types of medieval artist—playwrights, makers of xylographic books, embroiderers. Keeping in mind that the York *Magi* had an audience, however, one must also ask whether such traditions in art would have been a prominent part of the devotional life of the lay faithful in late medieval Yorkshire. If it could be shown that this were the case, such an affirmation would add credit to the argument that the York *Magi*’s Eucharistic allusions would have been a formative influence on the way the play was staged.

The search for popular devotional analogues to the Presentation of the Gifts of the Magi leads naturally to *The Lay Folks Mass Book*, a text which is capable of providing just such

insight into the lay-devotional life of late medieval Yorkshire. The following prayer appears there, with the suggestion that these words be prayed during Mass at the time of the offertory:

Go vp to him with ful good-wille,
And þi peny him profre,
Þauȝ þou be not þer-to in dette . . .
But fayn I wolde þat þou þus seide,
Whon þou in his hond it leide,
Or þenk it in þi þouht:
God þat was in Bethleem bore,
Þreo kynges kneled þe beo-fore,
And heore offryng brouȝt.
Þou tok heore offryng of all þre,
So receyue þis of me
And for-ȝete me nouȝt
Þat I may euer wiþ þe wone
And kuyndelich clepe þe godes sone
On þe Roode as þou me bouȝt.

(The Lay Folks Mass Book, Appendix IV.513-15, 521-532)²⁰⁴

The offertory prayer of this late medieval Yorkshire devotional manual puts the layperson in the place of the Magi, as one who brings both supplication and oblation to God. In so doing, it

recalls the mysteries of the Nativity, the Epiphany, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection of the Dead. It is a theologically cyclic prayer, gathering various parts of the Creed into a single articulation of faith. Its theological variety makes this prayer appropriate at any time of the liturgical cycle—Advent, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time—hence its inclusion in a lay devotional manual which would have been in use year-round. Most importantly for the present investigation, the prayer above demonstrates that the offerings of the Three Kings were an everyday analogy for the medieval Yorkshire layman’s participation in the Mass. In the mind of the York Cycle’s probable audience, the Presentation of the Gifts of the Magi would have been likely to have conjured associations with the liturgy in its own right.

The theological identification of the Communicant with the Three Kings is attested as well by yet another prayer which is found in all six of the witnesses which were used to compile *The Lay Folks Mass Book*, a fact which amplifies the importance of this evidence. The text of the offertory prayer reproduced below is furthermore taken from a witness inscribed to Abbot William Spenser of the Cistercian Abbey of Rivaux in Yorkshire’s North Riding at a time when the York Corpus Christi Cycle was flourishing, ca. 1437-45. By contrast to the prayer above, the prayer below focuses on the mysteries of the Nativity and Epiphany exclusively, without mention of the *Roode* or the cycle of mysteries which appear on the more elaborate English copes (Figs. 14 and 15 above). It is a simple, daily prayer:

Ihesu, þat was in bedlam borne,

And thre kinges come þe biforne;

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205 In creating the standard edition of the *The Lay Folks Mass Book*, Thomas Frederick Simmons used six different manuscripts dating from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries.

There they offered the gold, incense, and myrrh,
And you forsook none of them,
But wisely them we well all three
Hame agayne to there cuntre.
Right so our offerings that we offer,
And our prayers that we profere,
You take, lord, to thy lowynge,
And be our help in all thy thing,
That alle perils before done,
Oure gode zernynge you grant vs sone,
Of alle our mys you vs amende,
In alle our need vs socour sende. Amen.

(The Lay Folks Mass Book, Text C, ll.109-22)207

The Three Kings have here become the ideal for the Communicant. They model for the devout Christian how to bring an offering to Bethlehem. The Magi show the faithful Christian, that is, how to offer a sacrifice of praise during the offertory of the medieval Mass. The prayer above appropriately commemorates, like the prayers of the Three Kings in the York Magi, Jesus’ kingship, his divinity, and his humanity—in a word, his royal and eternal priesthood.

The Kings’ Prayers of Adoration Revisited

To the eyes and ears of medieval audiences, the prayers of the Three Kings in the York *Magi*, the images in the *Biblia Pauperum*, and the liturgical vestments from the Midlands all would have carried strong associations with the Eucharist. Given the breadth and depth of the evidence presented above, and given the fact of York XVIb’s Eucharistic allusions, it is difficult to imagine that late medieval England’s many traditions in art, liturgy, and devotion would not have been expressed somehow in the staging of the York *Magi*. How the play might have been staged is of course uncertain, but at the same time it is difficult to believe that the staging options implied by this chapter’s discussion would not have been adapted and put to use in medieval drama in one way or another.

Rather than attempt to suggest what in this particular case is probably beyond the reach of any study, I would like instead to close this chapter with an example of a painted glass roundel from Leicestershire which combines in a single image all of the theological depth and complexity of the whole variety of evidence presented above. Closing the discussion with this example shows, at least, that such a theologically informed staging would have been possible; and it shows this in the best possible way, since the example which I will discuss below offers not a twenty-first century American analogy but a fifteenth-century English analogy for the action which we here and now can only struggle to imagine taking place in medieval York.

A roundel from Leicestershire dating to ca. 1490 (Fig. 17, below) expresses with subtle wit the notion that the Three Kings in actuality receive much more than they give at Bethlehem. As one might expect, many elements of the usual iconography of the Epiphany are evidenced in
the Leicestershire Roundel—the Three Kings come in the traditional order, bringing gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The Star of Bethlehem shines through a hole in the thatching above, and the shepherds are there as well, rejoicing with song and dance. All this is to be expected. Much more interesting, however, is what one does not expect. The roundel exhibits a distinctive variation on the Epiphany theme. The Three Kings bring here specifically liturgical vessels, as in the *Biblia Pauperum*; and although the First King brings ‘gold’ to the scene of the Adoration, the Christ-child does with that ‘penny’ something visually tantalizing. Apparently playing with the First King’s coin or ‘penny-offering’, the ‘play’ in this case is a pageant of Holy Communion:

![Fig. 17. Adoration of the Magi and Shepherds. Painted-glass Roundel.](image)

Newarke Houses Museum. Leicestershire, ca. 1490.\(^{208}\)

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\(^{208}\) Reproduced from Kerry Ayre, *Medieval English Figurative Roundels*, Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi Series, Great Britain: Summary Catalogue 6 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55-6, No. 213, Fig. 2, Plate 3a.
The roundel bears a striking significance in itself: it is the visual equivalent of a *carmen figuratum* or ‘figured poem’, for the medallion’s focal and compositional center is a medallion within a medallion, the smaller one quite clearly *candida et rotunda* [white and round].\(^{209}\) The roundel is a ‘penny-prayer’ in the shape of a penny, a signifier which signifies itself. The visual design implies that the First King comes not just to see the prophecy fulfilled, but in fact to be filled by it. The Leicestershire Roundel in this way manifests a play on words meant not for the ears but for the eyes. It is an example of paronomasia or equivocation understood snyaesthetically, through sight rather than through sound. The medallion is a literal metaphor of a Eucharistic type. In this sense, then, the image communicates an array of devotional traditions and attitudes, doing so richly yet simply. Evidence of this painted-glass roundel’s ‘popular’ appeal, finally, is the fact that it comes not from a church but from a house.\(^{210}\)

Evidenced in the Leicestershire Roundel, the Chichester-Constable Chasuble, and the Epiphany page of the *Biblia Pauperum* (sig. c) is a wide array of ocular instances of Eucharistic paronomasia, the lexical parallel for which may be found in the prayers of the Three Kings in the York *Magi* (XVIb.321, 337). Such wordplay, both lexical and visual, sums up the likely semiological mode of the York *Magi*’s meditation on the Body of Christ. What medieval images ‘say’, what medieval ‘quicke bookis’ or *plaies* declare, is as complex and as subtle as if such speaking pictures were mute poems.

\(^{209}\) Cp. Davide Wilkins, ed., *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae: a Synodi Verolamiensis a.d. cccxlvii ad Londoniensem a.d. mdccxvii*, Vol. II, 132: the oblations used at Mass were, from at least the time of the Synod of Oxford in May of 1287, *candidae et rotundae*. The whole white roundness of the ‘penny’ in Fig. 19 invites and even suggests a Eucharistic reading of the image.

\(^{210}\) See Ayre, *Figurative Roundels*, 54. The house is modern-day 18 Highcross Street, Leicester. Ayre does not specify whether the glass is *in situ*, but he does say that the roundel has been on Highcross since its earliest documented description.
Chapter V

The Baptism of the Lord, and Some Post-Resurrection Plays

Chapters Three and Four of this dissertation have argued that the York plays of the *Nativity* (XIV) and the *Magi* (XVIb) are especially complex and many-layered narratives interwoven with late medieval English signs and symbols associated with the Eucharist, and that the York Infancy Sequence as a whole sustains a similar interest in a sacramental theme. The present chapter asks an analogous question about plays appearing in the middle and near the end of the cycle: do the York plays of the *Baptism* (XXI), *Christ’s Appearance to Mary Magdalene* (XXXIX), the *Supper at Emmaus* (XL), and the *Incredulity of Thomas* (XLI) similarly interweave several mysteries into a unified exposition of popular late medieval English Eucharistic devotion? To the extent that it is possible to bring art-historical evidence to bear on close-readings of these plays, this chapter will suggest that the York *Baptism* has substantial Eucharistic overtones, and that York XXXIX, XL, and XLI together constitute a series of three plays manifesting a sustained and gradually intensifying examination of what it means to wrestle with the Real Presence. These later plays in particular dramatize bewilderment about the Real Presence in terms of sense-perception, and most of all in terms of sight, touch, and taste.

I begin the discussion with the play of the *Baptism*, since this play comes next in the order of the cycle, and because this mystery so often accompanies the mysteries of the Nativity and Epiphany in late medieval English cyclic art. The literal meaning of the York *Baptism* is of course immediately apparent—the play deals substantially with the event of John Baptizing the Lord in the River Jordan (Lk. 3:21-25). In critical discourse, at least one sacramental dimension
the narrative has been discussed by Pamela King, who has investigated the play as a commentary on the theology of the sacrament of Baptism. Without negating King’s argument, this chapter will examine the York *Baptism* (XXI) not in baptismal terms but instead in Eucharistic terms, and this will lead in turn to a discussion of the play’s implications for the York Cycle’s cyclic aesthetic.

The Baptism: Iconographic Essentials

In the York *Baptism*, there is every indication that, no matter how it might have been staged in its particulars, the play would in any case have maintained all of the essential components of an iconography which was typical of this mystery’s narration in medieval art. The image which appears below—the Baptism of the Lord, reproduced from the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (Fig. 18)—presents a summary view of a typical late medieval depiction of the scene. The Father sends the Holy Spirit down from heaven as John baptizes the Lord in the River Jordan.

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210 See Pamela King, *York Cycle of Mysteries*, 42-5, 172-3, where the sacrament of baptism is discussed in connection to Pentecost but not in connection to the Eucharist, despite the thesis of King’s monograph (i.e., that the mystery of the Body of Christ is the central consideration of the York Cycle as a whole). See also King’s book-article, “The York Cycle and Instruction on the Sacraments” in Sarah Rees Jones, ed., *Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 161-4.

211 If this question be answered in the affirmative, such an affirmation would complement the conclusions reached by Lauren Lepow in a similar study of the Towneley *Baptism*. Lepow concludes, upon the basis of very different evidence and a quite different play-text, that the Towneley *Baptism* is “a dramatic metaphor for Eucharistic communion” (100). This chapter will argue for a similar range of semiosis in the York *Baptism* (though I will not, precisely speaking, argue that the play presents a metaphor for Communion).
Angels stand beside Jesus, holding in their hands his garments, of which he has divested himself in order to receive by immersion the sacrament which John administers.\footnote{This early fifteenth-century French example is presented here as an illustration of the type, with no claim being made here for the influence of this particular Book of Hours in England. Compare to the iconography of Fig. 20 the late medieval iconography described in Gertrud Schiller, \textit{Iconography of Christian Art} (London: Lund Humphries, 1971), 141-3, where the typical late medieval iconography parallels in detail the iconography of Fig. 20 (above), and where it is also noted that the Baptism in the latter half of the fifteenth century is viewed as the initiation of the Passion. For English depictions which look similar to York XXI and Fig. 20, see especially the Church of St. Mary in Rolleston, ca. 1490 (see Kerry Ayre, \textit{Medieval English Figurative Roundels}, Fig. 509), which maintains all elements except onlookers; the woodcut by Wynkyn de Werde dating to ca. 1525 (Fig. 22, below, reproduced from Edward Hodnett, \textit{English Woodcuts, 1480-1535}, fig. 61), which incorporates all essential elements; the depiction of the Baptism of the Lord in \textit{The Holkham Bible Picture Book}, ca. 1325, fol. 19' (in Michelle Brown, ed., \textit{The Holkham Bible Picture Book: A Facsimile}), which depicts neither angel nor onlookers; and finally the Church of St. Nicholas at Overstone, ca. 1510 (in Richard Marks, \textit{The Medieval Stained Glass of Northamptonshire}, pl. 15), which contains neither onlookers nor angels, and which also bears a noted French influence (see Marks, \textit{Stained Glass of Northants.}, 163).}
In a manner similar to the iconography of the illumination above, the dialogue of the York *Baptism* indicates the presence of four characters: *Johannes, I Angelus, II Angelus*, and *Jesus*. Whether and how the play might have depicted the Father and the Holy Spirit is completely open to speculation; and although it is difficult to imagine that the Father would have been depicted on stage, there nonetheless seems to be some indication that the Holy Spirit would have made an appearance in this play, an inference which may be soundly drawn from the angels singing the *Veni Creator Spiritus*.214 The central action of the play unfolds between those characters who have been assigned parts of the dialogue.215

Notably different from the portrayal in the *Très Riches Heures*, on the other hand, is the York *Baptism*’s centralization of the figure of St. John the Baptist himself.216 The majority of the dialogue has been given over to John; almost two thirds of the play’s lines are in fact spoken by him, and most of these are delivered prior to the coming of the Lord onto the scene. The dynamic of the play’s structure in itself thus imitates John’s exortation, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord” (Mk. 1:3). How and for what, though, does John prepare the audience? How does he gloss the baptism while it is in progress, and how do his words comment upon the mystery once it is

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214 The stage direction between York XXI.154 and 155 reads, *Tunc cantabant duo angeli, ‘Veni creator spiritus’*. For a brief history of the hymn’s origin, probable authorship, and uses in the liturgy, see the short entry by M. I. J. Rousseau in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14, 2nd ed., (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 439-0, where it is explained that the hymn is thought to have been penned by the ninth-century Bishop of Mainz Rabanus Maurus. The hymn was used especially for the Divine Office at Whitsuntide, and also for such occasions as ordinations, the translation of relics, and coronations.
215 This is not the case in the instances of the York *Nativity* and *Magi*, on the other hand, where there is every indication on the basis of (i) the dialogue and (ii) the stage-movement implied by the dialogue that characters who do not have dialogue assigned to them—the Ox and the Ass in the *Nativity*, and the Infant in the *Magi*—nonetheless would have played essential roles in the dramatic action itself.
216 Such an emphasis on the Lord rather than on St. John the Baptist is of course understandable in a static art form. No example I have found—in the art of the Netherlands, France, and England—gives even a fraction of the attention to John which is given by the York *Baptism*, which very much speaks to the nature of the medium of the drama.
complete? Are the words of John the words which one would anticipate, or not? A brief look at the play’s opening lines will set the stage for further discussion of these and other questions.

The pageant opens with John’s complaint-prayer to God about “mannis lesyne” or sinfulness, which he laments is so astounding that even his daily preaching of the Lord’s coming “serues of noght” (York XXI.7). Considering the dramatic potential of the play, one must weigh the likely semiological effect had this opening complaint been delivered by a member of the clergy who would have preached sermons to the lay faithful. Leaving this unknowable element of stage-production aside, however, one must consider at the play’s very opening the oddness of the rhetorical thrust of John’s introductory exhortation. If the play is ‘about’ the Baptism of the Lord, or even if it is primarily ‘about’ the Sacrament of Baptism, then why does John begin by encouraging the audience to “make þe redy” to become the “wonnyng-steed” or dwelling-place of the Lord? I quote here John’s attention-grabbing exhortation:

**Loke þou make þe redy, ay saide I,**

**Vnto oure lord God most of myght,**

**Pat is þat þou be clene haly**

**In worde, in werke, ay redy dighte**

**Agayns oure lord,**

**With parfit life þat ilke wight**

**Be well restored.**

**For if we be clene in levyng,**
Oure bodis are Goddis tempyll þan,
In the whilke he will make his dwelling.
Therefore be clene, both wiffe and man,
Pis is my reed;
God will make in yowe haly þan
His wonnyng-steed.
(York XXI.29-42)

What is odd about John’s brief sermon is the fact that the majority of Catholics in fifteenth-century England would already have been baptized as infants. Since infants could obviously not have benefitted from the exhortation, is John then addressing this injunction to recently baptized adults? It could hardly be otherwise; yet, if the exhortation is to a baptized audience, then could John on the other hand be exhorting his onlookers to prepare to receive an indwelling which is not baptismal but instead Eucharistic? In order to probe this question more fully, one is compelled to ask whether additional evidence might exist in this play to suggest that making oneself ready to be the Lord’s wonnyng-steed could be a thinly veiled reference to preparing for the reception of Holy Communion.

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217 See King, “Instruction on the Sacraments,” in Jones, Learning and Literacy, 161; and for corroborating literary evidence, see Pearl 625 fl.; and for supporting evidence in art, see the Seven Sacraments Window in Holy Trinity in Lincolnshire, reproduced in Ayre, Figurative Roundels, Fig. 219.

218 The reference here would have been veiled, of course, because those in the audience probably would have recognized the baptismal implications of wonnyng-steed, which ostensibly expresses the theology of Baptism as a mystery in which the soul receives the indwelling of the Trinity. I do not intend to challenge such a reading in the least, but rather to suggest that the presence of a Eucharistic subtext in addition to the baptismal text creates a fuller meaning.
One indication that the play is moving in a Eucharistic direction is John’s insistence on clean living and repentance, both of which were essential conditions for the reception of Holy Communion. The threefold emphasis on cleanness in John’s exhortation is furthermore interspersed with an allusion to the Confiteor—“in worde, in werke, ay redy dighte” (York XXI.32)—one of very few instances of a prayer of the Mass whose translation from the Latin appears in the Middle English Lay Folks Mass Book, a text which often parallels the prayers of the Mass without either paraphrasing or translating them. It makes little sense, however, for John to exhort the audience to confess their contrition for the sake of preparing for the sacrament of baptism, since baptism is the very sacrament which washes one clean of sins. Keeping in mind as well the cyclic, annual nature of this play, one must also ask why the playwrights would write into John’s opening monologue an exhortation which, for the unbaptized adult, would only have had meaning once in a lifetime. Surely there must be something more at work in this play.

In an attempt to resolve this logical impasse, I turn now to a closer inspection of John’s declared aversion to touching the Body of Christ (York XXI.141-54). What might John’s pious hesitation to touch the Body of Christ have conjured in the minds of York’s medieval audiences? How might medieval audiences have been disposed to receive John’s confession of holy fear? Is there a likely symbolic register to this unwillingness to touch the Body of Christ? Returning to a detail from the Baptism of the Lord in the Très Riches Heures, I draw attention once more to the iconographic elements whose presence in the York Baptism might be inferred from the dialogue

\[219\] See York XXI.32. Cp. Simmons, Lay Folks Mass Book, 8: “In worde, in werke, I am to wyte”. In his creation of this edition, Simmons has collated some six witnesses. The manuscript which has furnished the quotation immediately above was inscribed to Abbot William Spenser of the Cistercian Abbey of Rivaullx in Yorkshire’s North Riding at a time when the York Corpus Christi Cycle was flourishing, ca. 1437-5.
itself. The Baptist, Jesus, two angels, and a crowd of onlookers all would have been present in the York pageant. The descent of the Holy Spirit is a likelihood, the presence of the Father a slim possibility, and the use of the small dish for the baptism a strong probability given this play’s sponsorship by the Barbers. About the garments held by the angel, one may only speculate; since there is nothing in the text itself to suggest either the presence or absence of such symbolic objects, it would be equally tenuous to either affirm or deny their use.

Fig. 19. Angels Holding Garment. Detail.
Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry
French, ca. 1411-42

Fig. 20. Wynkyn de Werde.
The Baptism of the Lord.
English Woodcut, 1525

Reproduced from Cazelles and Rathofer, Illuminations, 131.
Reproduced from E. Hodnett, English Woodcuts, 1480-1535 (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), Fig. 61.
Even though the two depictions above are separated by almost a century and by the English Channel, their iconography is impressively similar, despite the fact that the illumination on the left was painted for a wealthy magnate, whereas the woodcut on the right was created for the commoner. Equally noteworthy is each figure’s compatibility with the action inferred from the dialogue of the York Baptism (XXI). In Fig. 19, Jesus’ body is rendered by the artist in pure white, a detail which resonates with the medieval notion that fairer skin was indicative of noble birth. This detail also resonates with the the York Cycle’s many instances of paronomasia describing the Body of Christ as ‘frely foode’—frely meaning ‘free-born’ or ‘noble’, and foode meaning both ‘food’ and ‘person’.\(^{222}\) In Fig. 19, yet another resonance is with the canonical requirement that the oblatae or offertory gifts used in the Eucharistic sacrifice were to be both candidae et rotundae [white and round].\(^{223}\) The final litany in the York Missal’s prayer of preparation for Mass—the Oratio Sancti Augustini—in fact begins with the apostrophe Panis candidissime, which may be translated either as ‘whitest’ or as ‘most resplendent’ Bread.\(^{224}\)

As in the Très Riches Heures, the Body of Christ is the principal focus of the York Baptism. The evidence in support of a Eucharistic reception by the audience of the play will thus be pursued below in two distinct phases. First, I will consider the iconographic, devotional, and intellectual milieu which may provide a cultural and devotional enthymeme or set of assumptions for a close-reading of the play. Second, I will look closely at the play text as

\(^{222}\) Cp. York XV.78. Also see definitions for ‘fode’ in The Middle English Dictionary.

\(^{223}\) This requirement was in place from at least the time of the Synod of Oxford, held on May 16\(^{th}\), 1287, which addressed each of the sacraments as well as a variety of matters both doctrinal and pragmatic. See Davide Wilkins, ed., Synodus Oxoniensis, De eucharistia, Cap. 4, in Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae (London: R. Gosling, F. Gyles, T. Woodward, and C. Davis, 1737), II.132.

\(^{224}\) Henderson, Missale Eboracensis, 164.
compared to the York Missal. This phased approach will demonstrate several ways in which one may read John’s exhortation and expression of holy fear as being specifically and recognizeably Eucharistic for medieval audiences.

It is first of all possible that the York Baptism’s Eucharistic valence of meaning could have hinged on the simple inclusion of a linen held in the hands of the attendant angel. The next image, an illumination of the Christmas Mass reproduced from the Très Riches Heures on account of its level of detail (Fig. 21, below), shows more fully what I mean to suggest. The Mass as depicted here would have been observed in like manner in both French and English liturgy during the fifteenth century. The celebrant stands in the orans or ‘praying’ pose, facing liturgical East, his back to the people. The deacon and sub-deacon kneel behind the celebrant. Behind the priest are two noblewomen following the Mass in their devotional books. To the right of the altar, a man in a blue cloak pulls back an altar-curtain—common practice during the Middle Ages was to have altar-curtains flanking the sides of the altar, with the curtains being pulled back for the moment of the major elevation of the Host.225 Behind the man pulling the altar-curtain are the lay faithful, and between the man and the laity are the choir. While all of the other members of the choir sing, one of the tonsured singers looks up towards the vaulting of the church, and so too the two acolytes to the left of the altar, one of whom bears upon his right shoulder a long cloth whose fringes are adorned with tassels.

Taking special note of the cloth draped over the right shoulder of the tonsured acolyte, one may follow the eyes of both the acolytes and the one choir member towards the ceiling of the

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225 For an example of this arrangement of the altar in medieval York, see the St. William Window in York Minster (ca. 1421), reproduced in John A. Knowles, Essays in the History of the York School of Glass-painting (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), Fig. 26.
church. The rich blue hue of the church’s upper dome is repeated in the rich blue of the main altar’s canopy, as well as in the altar frontal and kneeler, all of whose golden elaborations echo visually the stars of the decorated ceiling vault. Immediately beneath the ‘dome of the heavens’ (i.e., the vaulted ceiling) are three angels dressed in the white robes of acolytes. One of these angels holds a long white cloth like the one held by the acolyte near the altar, and another holds a golden bowl, and yet another still holds a conical golden vessel which appears to be a pyx. Beneath the image appears a decorated initial introducing the words *Puer natus est nobis*, with a depiction of Mary and Joseph at the Nativity adoring the Infant upon a corporal veil.
It is even possible to estimate approximately the part of the Mass during which this scene takes place. Because the priest’s hands are in the orans pose, with the altar-curtain drawn back and

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226 Reproduced from Cazelles and Rathofer, *Illuminations*, 165.
with the acolytes at the ready with their long white cloth, one may say with confidence that this scene takes place during the Canon of the Mass. Because the angels are awaiting the reception of the Body of Christ into their sacred vessels near the church’s vaulted ceiling, the moment depicted calls to mind the line of the Canon which reads, “We pray that your holy angels may take this sacrifice to your altar in Heaven.” All such details place this scene after the consecration and elevation, just prior to the doxology and Communion.

Prominent in this depiction of the Christmas Mass—and so too in the York Baptism (XXI)—is the visual emphasis on what it means to have a holy fear of touching the Body of Christ. Drawing two details from The Christmas Mass (Figs. 22 and 23, below), plus one more from the Très Riches Heures (Fig. 24, below), and one more still from The Sherborne Missal (Fig. 25, below), I would like to suggest just how simple it would have been for the York dramatists to have expressed John’s fear of touching the Body of Christ in a visual way which would not be evident in the play text itself, but which would nonetheless have been a natural visual complement to John’s expression of holy fear in the context of late medieval piety. I would also like to suggest that, regardless of how the York Baptism was staged, these images offer several contemporary Eucharistic analogues for John’s expression of discomfort with the idea of touching the Body of Christ. If one should have a holy fear of so much as touching Him, how much stronger would John’s words have been in the context of Holy Communion?

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227 See Henderson, Missale Eboracensis, 188: Supplices te rogamus, omnipotens Deus, jube haec preferri per manus sancti angeli tui in sublime altare tuum, in conspectu divinae maiestatis tuae, etc. The Canon would naturally have been the same in both French and English liturgy.

Fig. 22 below reproduces a detail from The Christmas Mass in which the linen about to be used for Holy Communion is draped over the right shoulder of one of two acolytes kneeling in prayer. Three angels are dressed as acolytes in Fig. 23, awaiting the Christmas sacrifice in alb and cincture; one of the three is holding a cloth (known as a *saculum*) with which to enshroud the Eucharistic sacrifice to be brought to the altar of the Eternal Mass in Heaven. The First King at the Epiphany (Fig. 24) appears to enshroud the foot of Infant so as not to touch his body when he kisses it. A similar cloth is used in The Sherborne Missal (Fig. 25) at the moment of Holy Communion. In this English example, the two acolytes using the Communion cloth are overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, who descends through the hands of the priest in a moment analogous to the *epiclesis* or descent of the Holy Spirit at the moment of Holy Communion.
The linens appearing in the instances above provide a series of visual analogues to the Lord’s robes in the scene of the Baptism. Each of the examples above is, moreover, Eucharistic in character. In the English example from the *Sherborne Missal* (Fig. 25), the linen’s purpose is most readily apparent. There was evidently a Communion-linen in use in medieval England which was placed under the paten in order to catch any crumb of the Living Bread which might have fallen at the moment of Communion.229 Nor was this practice unique to England: the communion-linen was also in use in France, as is evident in Fig. 22 where the acolyte’s right shoulder is draped with the same cloth. The gesture of the First King (Fig. 24) is probably an allusion to the commonly witnessed liturgical use of the communion-linen, which further corroborates the Eucharistic reading of the Nativity and Adoration scenes suggested by evidence presented in the previous two chapters of this dissertation. Most striking of all, perhaps, is the use of the same communion-linen by the angels awaiting the Eucharistic sacrifice in The Christmas Mass (Fig. 23). A close comparison of this image to Figs. 21 and 22 above demonstrates the object’s strong potential for drawing an explicit visual connection to the garment held by attendant angels at the Baptism of the Lord in both English and French art.230

But would medieval audiences have associated the Lord’s clothes with the linen used for Holy Communion? Might such a device also have called to mind other scenes where Christ’s Body was touched, albeit against the inclination of those who could not help but touch the Body

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229 Even though the laity would have received the Eucharist only on rare occasions in Europe during the Middle Ages, they nonetheless would have witnessed the reception of Communion by the deacon and sub-deacon as often as the clergy communicated, which would presumably have been at every High Mass.

230 Depictions of the scene in the art of medieval England have the Lord’s clothing looking more or less like a garment versus a Communion-linen; the closest parallel to the Communion-linen is probably in The Church of St. Mary in Rolleston (see Ayre, *Figurative Roundels*, fig. 509), where the garment’s fringes are apparently decorated.
of Christ? If so, then such scenes would have been linked symbolically, hypertextually, and semiotically to the Eucharist—scenes such as the Circumcision, the Presentation, the Deposition, and the Resurrection, where the Body of Christ is almost invariably hidden from sight, or from touch, by a thin veil. No matter how one resolves these and similar questions, the examples above present strong evidence for a broader cultural context within which the touching of the Body of Christ is handled carefully by artists. The York dramatists were just such careful artists in their handling of John’s touching of the Body of Christ.

With all such cultural associations in mind, John the Baptist’s declaration—“For the to touche haue I grete drede” (York XXI.144)—becomes much more suggestive. Given the cultural context of John’s dread, his words appear to be a rather direct expression of reverence for the Body of Christ. Whether or not the linen had played a symbolically significant role, John’s confession of dread itself clearly links the York Baptism to a commemoration of the Body of Christ. So when John the Baptist encourages the lay faithful to prepare for Christ’s coming, his exhortation was very likely to have been understood in many different senses at once: as an exposition on baptism, as encouragement to prepare for the Last Judgment, and most immediately as an exhortation to prepare for Holy Communion, in this case on the very Feast of the Body of Christ. Just as the soul is made the dwelling place of God in baptism, so the soul is also made the dwelling place of God in Holy Communion; and this progression—exhortation to baptism as a literal-metaphorical preparation for the Eucharist—is one of the ways in which to understand John’s exhortation, *make pe redy*. 
Further evidence for the Eucharistic character of the York \textit{Baptism} may be found in John’s attitude towards the mystery which he is about to enact, which seems to him a rather impossible role. John is emphatically aware that he is not worthy to celebrate the mystery of Christ’s baptism, the commemoration of his death-in-life and life-in-death. Immediately prior to baptizing Jesus, John expresses—in words addressed directly to his Lord—not only his fear of touching the Body of Christ, but also his admitted inability to “do this work” which only God, “who ordained all things”, can accomplish through his unworthy servant:

\begin{verbatim}
A, lorde, I trymble þer I stande,
So am I arrow to do þat dede.
But saue me, lord, þat all ordand,
For the to touche haue I grete drede,
For doynges dark.
Now helpe me, lorde, thurgh þi Godhede,
To do þis werk.
\end{verbatim}

(York XXI.141-7)

All of the essential elements of John’s anxious and meticulous preparation to touch the Body of Christ—his fear and trembling on account of his sinfulness, his avowed confidence in the Lord’s power to make worthy the hands of a sinner, and his ultimate submission to Jesus’ command to
“do this work”—all of these are likewise found in the York Missal’s Prayer of Saint Augustine, which each member of the Yorkshire clergy would have prayed daily in preparation for Mass:

Who is able to celebrate this [mystery], Almighty God, unless you will have made worthy the one who brings the offering? I know—truly do I know—and so too do I confess your goodness, because I am not worthy to approach such a mystery on account of my grievous sins and infinite omissions. But I know and truly believe in my heart, confess with my mouth even, that you have the power to make me worthy, you who alone have the power to make clean the one who has been conceived of an unclean seed, you who alone make of sinners just men and even saints. Through this your omnipotence I beg, grant me, a sinner, to celebrate this celestial sacrifice, with fear and trembling, with purity of heart and a fountain of tears, with spiritual happiness and celestial joy.\(^{231}\)

(Henderson, *Missale Eboracensis*, 164-5)

The overlap of theological and human sentiment between John the Baptist’s anxious expression of unworthiness and the York Missal’s Prayer of St. Augustine could hardly be more complete. Both confessions emphasize the unworthiness of the mystery’s celebrant, the celestial character

\(^{231}\) Translation my own. Original text: *Quis digne hoc celebrare potest, nisi tu, Deus omnipotens, offerentem feceris dignum? Scio et vere scio, et idipsum bonitate tuae confiteor, quod non sum dignus ad tantum accedere mysterium propter nimia peccata mea, et negligentias meas infinitas. Sed scio et veraciter ex toto corde credo, ore confiteor, quia tu potes me facere dignum, qui solus potes facere mundum de immundo conceptum semine, et de peccatoribus justos facis et sanctos. [¶] Per hanc omnipotentiam tuam te rogo, concede mihi peccatori hoc caeleste sacrificium celebrare, cum timore et tremore, cum cordis puritate et lacrimarum fonte, cum laetitia spirituali et gaudio caelesti.*
of the mystery itself, and God’s omnipotent ability to endow the celebrant with the power to confess the sacrament in word and therefore in work.

The *Oratio Sancti Augustini* further emphasizes cleanness, signaling yet another affinity with the York *Baptism*, a play which is primarily about being washed clean as a preparation for receiving the indwelling of the Trinity. In the end, St. Augustine and St. John the Baptist are in fact asking essentially the same question, the very question which would have come to the mind of Yorkshire priests prior to celebrating the mystery of the Mass: how can I, a mere and sinful man, call the Holy Spirit down from the Father in Heaven upon God the Son in order to bless, and so consecrate, the Body of Christ? How can I bless what is holy when I myself am not?

Considered in this light, the *Baptism*’s variations on the biblical account take on a whole new meaning. Whereas God the Holy Spirit descends upon God the Son accompanied by the voice of God the Father in the biblical account (Mk. 1:7-11), in the York *Baptism* there is no such indication of God the Father’s voice speaking or being heard. Here the Holy Spirit does not descend until four lines after—i.e., almost immediately following—John’s blessing of Jesus, “in þe name / Of the fadir and of the sone and holy gost” (York XXI.150). John is portrayed in a priestly light, as the very cause of the Holy Spirit’s descent, in a dramatic rendering of a baptismal analogy to the invocation and sacramental descent of the Holy Spirit, the *epiclesis*. Most striking of all, therefore, is the play’s dramatization of the notion that the sacraments’ efficacy is achieved through God’s omnipotence, *ex opere operato*. Despite John’s confessed unworthiness, *his words are able to do this work* on account of the inherent power of
sacramental grace, a real power given by Christ to an outward sign regardless of the personal righteousness of a sacrament’s celebrant.\textsuperscript{232}

The connection between baptism and the Eucharist in sacramental theology has likewise been noted by Lauren Lepow in her discussion of the Towneley \textit{Baptism} (XVIII).\textsuperscript{233} This fact seems to corroborate a similar reading of the York \textit{Baptism} (XXI), and given the fact that, in medieval sacramental theology, Holy Communion was commonly understood to hold the place of the pinnacle of the spiritual life as the very consummation of baptism, the burden of proof therefore seems rather to rest on those who would deny rather than affirm the likelihood that the York \textit{Baptism} has a demonstrably Eucharistic character. So although Pamela King has not noted the Eucharistic valence of meaning in York XXI, this may be accounted for by her emphasis on the play’s baptismal dimension. What many modern readers do not account for, on the other hand, is the notion that the baptismal meaning of the play, while coexisting alongside the narrative of the mystery of the Baptism of the Lord itself, veils a deeper anagogical and an immediately Eucharistic meaning. One may even go so far as to say that the Eucharistic meaning itself points forward to the Apocalypse—the unveiling—and by extension to the \textit{sacrum convivium} or Celestial Banquet.

John the Baptist’s prophecy in the play’s second stanza is therefore all the more crucial, especially since this stanza’s closing lines have been discussed in connection with the sacrament

\textsuperscript{232} For an early articulation of the power of the sacraments to effect what they signify, to be efficacious \textit{ex opere operato}, see Thomas Aquinas, \textit{ST} III.8, resp.: \textit{Non enim sacramentum perficitur per iustitiam hominis dantis vel suscipientis baptismum, sed per virtutem Dei}.

\textsuperscript{233} For more on the Towneley \textit{Baptism}’s Eucharistic character, see Lepow, \textit{Enacting the Sacrament}, 100.
of Confirmation but not in reference to the Eucharist.\footnote{See King, \textit{York Mystery Cycle}, 172.} I would like to suggest that this stanza introduces both a Eucharistic and an apocalyptic subtext, especially in its use of the word \textit{taste}:

When I haue, lord, in the name of the,
Baptiste þe folke in water clere,
Þan haue I saide þat aftir me
Shall he come þat has more powere
Þan I to taste;
He schall giffe baptyme more entire,
In fire and gaste.

(York XXI.8-14)

The word \textit{taste} is an instance of paronomasia which hints at the undertone of the play almost from the play’s very beginning (XXI.12). Although the Middle English verb \textit{to taste} could have meant ‘to test’, the pun which the modern ear perceives was equally poignant in the Middle Ages: the primary definition of the word ‘to taste’ was, like our Modern English word, ‘to perceive the flavor of’.\footnote{Robert E. Lewis, ed., Middle English Dictionary (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), s.v. “taste”} What John is saying is therefore potentially rich with multiple layers of suggestion. In the Eucharist, the soul ‘tastes’ God and ‘tests’ Him bodily, and in that very Eucharistic communion or \textit{tastinge}, God has even more power both to ‘taste’ and to ‘test’ the soul spiritually or \textit{gastely}. Such a pun had numerous analogues in art, in fact, where the damned
at the final judgment are swallowed or *tasted* by a Hell-mouth, whereas the blessed process towards the heavenly altar to *taste* Holy Communion.\textsuperscript{236}

One might also read Jesus’ consolation of St. John in a Eucharistic light when He says to him, “But suffer nowe for heuenly mede” (York XXI.128). The word *mede*, meaning both ‘reward’ and ‘drink’ in Middle English, might have registered with medieval audiences as yet another instance of paronomasia. When *Johannes* blesses the audience with his final farewell, a Eucharistic interpretation similarly casts his words into sharper relief: “Now sirs, þat barne þat Marie bare / Be with ʒou all” (York XXI.175). The Sacrament of the Altar is the mystery of the Real Presence of Christ, which John in his farewell connects appropriately to the mystery of the Incarnation made visible at the Nativity. All such details culled from close-reading provide a favorable context for interpreting York XXI as an exposition on the theology of the sacrament of baptism, a rite which is ultimately ordered to the reception of Communion, *quia sacramentum vero baptismi ordinatur ad Eucharistiae receptionem*.\textsuperscript{237}

\textsuperscript{236} For the image of Communion, see *Pearl* 786, 862, and 1115; cp. on the other hand the hell-mouth upon the front of the re-created Mercers’ pageant waggons for the York *Doomsday* (XLVII), in Clifford Davidson, *Illustrations of the Stage and Acting* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 22. For several other examples from late medieval Yorkshire, see also James Hogg, ed., *An Illustrated Yorkshire Carthusian Miscellany: British Library London Additional MS 37049* (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1981), fols. 17v, 64v, 73v, 74v, and 81r. See also Peter Meredith, “The Development of the York Mercers’ Pageant Wagon” (*Medieval English Theatre* 1, 1979), 5-18. For additional examples of the hell-mouth ‘tasting’ the damned, see Henry, *Biblia Pauperum*, sig. v and sig. •h•, where the ‘procession’ of the damned into the ‘mouth’ of hell may be contrasted against the escape of the blessed from the mouth of hell at the harrowing.

\textsuperscript{237} See Aquinas on baptism in relationship to the Eucharist, in *ST*, III, q.65, a.3, resp.: “... For all the other sacraments appear to be ordered to this sacrament as to an end. ... Indeed the sacrament of baptism is ordered to the reception of communion” (translation my own). Original text: ... *nam omnia alia sacramenta ordinari videntur ad hoc sacramentum sicut ad finem. ... Sacramentum vero baptismi ordinatur ad Eucharistiae receptionem.*
Behold the Lamb of God

Given the sacramental character of the York *Baptism* (XXI), one might expect to find reflected in the art-historical record John the Baptist’s association with both baptism and the Eucharist. This is in fact the case. Like the scenes of the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi on the Chichester-Constable Chasuble and the Butler-Bowdon Cope, the York plays of the *Nativity* (XIV) and the *Magi* (XVIb) form a cyclic narrative in miniature, a couplet of mysteries which comment on one another. Immediately to the right of the Epiphany scene on the Butler-Bowdon Cope (Figs. 13 and 16, above), John the Baptist ostends in his right hand a slim, round disc—a medallion or roundel—upon whose surface is the image of a lamb (Fig. 26, below). The Baptist’s spatial orientation upon the cope, even his posture itself, hints at his most characteristic utterance, *Ecce Agnus Dei* (Jn. 1:36). The Baptist gestures toward the Three Kings’ offerings at the Epiphany, his roundel appearing to say “Ecce” of the Nativity and the Adoration.

The Chichester-Constable Chasuble (Figs. 13 and 16, above), like the Butler-Bowdon Cope (Figs. 13 and 16 above, 26 and 29, below), also bears an image of St. John the Baptist holding an *Ecce* roundel with a lamb upon its surface.238 These iconographies of the Baptist, arranged in a similar fashion upon this fifteenth-century English cope and chasuble, respectively, reflect in a static mode a narrative tendency to interweave or co-narrate more than one biblical

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238 Note that in Fig. 13 of this dissertation it is not possible to see this Ecce roundel, since it appears on the other side of the chasuble. I rely here on the brief description in Donald King, *Opus Anglicanum: English Medieval Embroidery* (London: The Victoria and Albert Museum, 1963), 39, where an account is given of “St. John the Baptist with a disc containing the Lamb of God” appearing on the front side of the Chichester-Constable Chasuble.
mystery in one place at one time—in a cyclic manner, that is—as in the following detail which juxtaposes John the Baptist (with *Ecce* attribute) against the scene of the Adoration of the Magi.

Fig. 26. Adoration of the Magi (left), John the Baptist with *Ecce* Roundel (right)
Victoria and Albert Museum, Museum Number T.36-1955
Detail. The Butler-Bowdon Cope. English, ca. 1330-50.

John the Baptist thus points typologically to the Lamb of God in the Adoration of the Magi at Bethlehem (Fig. 26, above). By holding in his hand a visual reminder of the Paschal Lamb, John also points forward to the sacramental mystery established at the Last Supper, to the paschal

239 Reproduced from Donald King and Santina Levey, *The Victoria and Albert Museum’s Textile Collection: Embroidery in Britain from 1200 to 1750* (New York: Canopy, 1993), 41, Fig. 14.
mystery fulfilled in the events of the passion, and ultimately to the eschatological mystery of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb.

John the Baptist’s *Ecce Agnus Dei* roundel appears not only in late medieval English embroidery, but also in late medieval English stained glass, stone sculpture, and ivory carving (see below, Figs. 27, 28, and 30). For the sake of comparison, I have reproduced below all four examples of this iconography in all four different media. In each case, John the Baptist holds a large roundel depicting the Lamb of God, a visual representation of John’s prophecy of the coming of the Messiah in John 1:36.
The four examples above, ranging in dates from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, give a sense of the tenure of this iconography in medieval England well into the performance history of the York Cycle, even up to the time when the York Register was copied.\textsuperscript{244} Although the post-consecration elevation alongside the proclamation \textit{Ecce Agnus Dei} had not yet become the liturgical norm in England by this time, John the Baptist’s roundel is nonetheless an attribute

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\begin{tabular}{l}
Fig. 27. \hspace{1cm} Fig. 28. \hspace{1cm} Fig. 29. \hspace{1cm} Fig. 30. \\
John the Baptist \hspace{1cm} John the Baptist \hspace{1cm} John the Baptist \hspace{1cm} John the Baptist \\
with Ecce Roundel\textsuperscript{240} \hspace{1cm} with Ecce Roundel\textsuperscript{241} \hspace{1cm} with Ecce Roundel\textsuperscript{242} \hspace{1cm} with Ecce Roundel\textsuperscript{243} \\
Church of St. Leonard \hspace{1cm} The Grandisson Diptych \hspace{1cm} Butler-Bowdon Cope \hspace{1cm} Stone Screen-statue \\
Tower, West Window \hspace{1cm} Ivory Carving \hspace{1cm} Victoria and Albert Museum \hspace{1cm} Lady Chapel \\
Hardwick, Northants. \hspace{1cm} The British Museum (?) \hspace{1cm} Museum No.: T.36-1955 \hspace{1cm} Hereford \\
English, ca. 1280-1310 \hspace{1cm} English, ca. 1340 \hspace{1cm} English, ca. 1330-50 \hspace{1cm} English, ca. 1450
\end{tabular}
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{240} Reproduced from Richard Marks, \textit{The Medieval Stained Glass of Northamptonshire} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 95, w1 2a.
\textsuperscript{241} Reproduced from Edward Prior and Arthur Gardner, eds., \textit{An Account of Medieval Figure-sculpture in England: with 855 photographs} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 357, Fig. 405.
\textsuperscript{242} Reproduced from Donald King and Santina Levey, \textit{The Victoria and Albert Museum’s Textile Collection: Embroidery in Britain from 1200 to 1750} (New York: Canopy, 1993), 41, Fig. 14.
\textsuperscript{243} Reproduced from Edward Prior and Arthur Gardner, eds., \textit{An Account of Medieval Figure-sculpture in England: with 855 photographs} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 404, Fig. 480.
\textsuperscript{244} In ca. 1463-77, that is; see Richard Beadle, \textit{York Plays}, xii.
with a wide range of Eucharistic associations. The image of the Lamb of God appears, for example, in other types of medieval English ecclesiastical embroidery and was deemed a fitting subject for the burse, the liturgical linen which encased the corporal veil, these two having been placed together atop the paten and chalice when not in use during the Mass.\textsuperscript{245}

Given the potential of John the Baptist’s roundel to symbolize or to visually approximate the white roundness of the Host, and given the Eucharistic suggestiveness of the York \textit{Baptism} (XXI), such a roundel may have been used to great effect by John the Baptist during one or more of his dramatic monologues (see especially XXI.1-49). The play of the \textit{Baptism} at Wakefield (Towneley XVIII) was in fact even more direct, since in the case of Towneley there are strong indications that John would have handed an actual, living lamb to Jesus on stage.\textsuperscript{246} Although there is no indication that a living lamb would have been used at York, the use of a roundel with the image of a lamb upon it would have maintained the play’s baptismal character while also allowing for a visual expression of the play’s Eucharistic aspects. In that case the York \textit{Baptism} would have offered a staging which reflected the medieval notion that baptism is ordered to the Eucharist as to an end.

\textsuperscript{245} For one example of the Agnus Dei embroidered on a late medieval English burse, see Beryl Dean, \textit{Ecclesiastical Embroidery} (Newton Centre: Charles T. Branford Co., 1958), 54, pl. VIII.
\textsuperscript{246} See Lepow, \textit{Enacting the Sacrament}, 99-100.
Extensions

Several of the ways in which Eucharistic allusions operate in the York Cycle have thus far been demonstrated in the detailed analysis of three very different examples—in the Nativity (York XIV), in the Magi (York XVIb), and in the Baptism (York XXI), respectively. Yorkshire playwrights crafted Eucharistic allusions through the use of verbal equivocations. The potential existed for them to combine paronomasia with its visual equivalencies. Such semiotic extensions would have been immediately apparent to medieval audiences, especially given the context of the plays’ devotional and cultural milieu. The evidence presented thus far in every way affirms therefore the argument that the York Cycle constitutes a “customised celebratory event” substantially designed to honor the Feast of Corpus Christi.\(^\text{247}\) The thesis put forward by Pamela King in her recent book, however, does not adequately capture the depth and variety of the cycle’s Eucharistic extensions. King suggests:

> The exclamatory greetings which occur specifically at moments when Christ appears seem, in pageants attributable to a number of different hands, to create dramatic moments which are not merely recollective of New Testament history, but which, through paraliturgical meditation, are intentionally analogous to the process of transubstantiation.

(King, *York Mystery Cycle*, 21)

King’s assertion is largely correct; yet the statement above, which links too closely the appearances of Christ’s body to transubstantiation specifically, in many ways inadequately expresses the breadth and depth of what is happening in so many of the plays. Although transubstantiation was entailed in medieval Eucharistic theology, not all medieval Eucharistic meditation is reducible to the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Much less so can dramatic art be limited to a didactic explication of the doctrine of transubstantiation. The York Cycle’s meditations on the Eucharist run deeper and extend further than the teaching about the physics of the Eucharist, although certain plays may very well reflect upon that as well. By examining the York plays of Christ’s Appearance to Mary Magdalene (XXXIX), The Supper at Emmaus (XL), and The Incredulity of Thomas (XLI), this chapter will conclude by arguing for a much broader extension of the York Cycle’s Eucharistic allusions than has up to now been attempted even by those scholars who are inclined to believe that there is a connection between the feast and the plays. Not reducible to a single aspect of Eucharistic doctrine, the plays of the York Cycle open their audiences’ minds to a very wide spectrum of both traditional and original Eucharistic thought.

Quem Quaeritis?

The Wynedrawers’s Mary Magdalene (York XXXIX) appropriates the medieval Quem Quaeritis and Hortulanus topoi in order to dramatize aspects of Eucharistic piety which deal less with
doctrinal matters and more with the personal experience of devotion itself. This fact renders this play unique among the plays of the York Cycle which handle the matter of the Blessed Sacrament. Whereas the play of the *Baptism* (York XXI) places emphasis on John seeing what others cannot see, touching what others cannot touch—the very Presence of God, the Body of Christ—the play of *Christ’s Appearance* (XXXIX) dramatizes instead the experience of most of the lay faithful in fifteenth-century England. Although Mary sees the Body of Christ, for example, she does not recognize her Lord even when she sees him. Even though she is actively seeking Him, she does not ‘find’ him; and, unlike in the case of John the Baptist, the invitation to touch Christ’s Body is not extended to Mary Magdalene, just as the invitation was not at that time extended to the lay faithful.

The play opens with Mary Magdalene soliloquizing about her soul’s sadness over the events of the Passion (XXXIX.1-19). Her soliloquy begins as a monologue but ends as a dialogue expressed in the form of a prayer: “þou graunte me grace to haue a sight / Of my lorde, or ellis his sande” (XXXIX.20-1). Almost as soon as Mary says these words, Jesus appears and replies, “Whome sekist þou þis longtime day? / Say me þe soothe, als Criste þe rede” (XXXIX.26-7). The dramatic irony is rich and humorous and pitiable, all at once: no sooner does Mary pray for the sight of her Lord, or else for some word from Him, than she gets both without knowing it—“I se hym noght,” she declares (XXXIX.35).

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For a brief introduction to tropes originating with the Easter liturgy—i.e., *Quem Quaeritis* and *Hortulanus*—see Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), I.201 ff. The term *Quem Quaeritis* refers to the introit for the Easter liturgy, *Quem quaeritis in sepulchro?*, which from the tenth century on is associated with paraliturgical drama. The term *Hortulanus* originates with the tradition of Mary Magdalene encountering Jesus dressed as a *hortulanus* or gardener (classical *hortensis*) after the Resurrection. For an early example, see Karl Young’s discussion of the Fleury Playbook in *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, I.393 ff.
The fact that Mary does not recognize Jesus’s risen body would of course be enough to establish a parallel to the Eucharistic Presence, a mystery about which the lay faithful of the Middle Ages might well have made a similar claim—“I see Him not.” The York play of the Appearance even goes so far as to situate Mary’s claim, however, in an explicitly Eucharistic context. Mary asks Jesus, “Whe[r] Goddis body founden myght be / þat Joseph of þe crosse gonne take?”, to which He replies, “What wolde þou doo with þat body bare, / þat beried was with balefull chere?” (XXXIX.46-7, 50-1). The dialogue at this point appears to be about the literal, crucified, buried body of Christ. The implications and connotations of the dialogue would nonetheless have put the minds of the audience on alert, since on the Feast of the Body of Christ Mary asks the question, “Where may God’s body be?” Mary confesses, now almost as a type of Ecclesia, that all her sadness would be consoled if she could only have the Body of Christ: “A, myght I euere with þat man mete, / … / Drye schulde I wype þat nowe is wete” (XXXIX.59, 61). Mary speaks literally of her tears, of course. Given the context of the Eucharistic feast on which the play was enacted, however, Mary Magdalene’s expression of longing for Corpus Christi also has broader applications.

Although Mary means in York XXXIX.61 that she would wipe away her tears if she were to meet Jesus, she in fact does something very different when she realizes who is standing before her: “Mi lorde Jesu, I knowe nowe þe, / þi woundes þai are nowe wette” (XXXIX.80-1). Jesus’ reply to Mary implies that she has actually dared to reach out and touch his body—“Negh me noght, my loue, latte be” (XXXIX.82)—a prohibition which Jesus actually has to re-emphasize from his exhortation just ten lines prior, “Goo awaye, Marie, and touche me noʒt” (XXXIX.72).
The dialogue implies that Mary reaches out to him at least twice, once to touch his Body and once more to touch his Blood. Both times she is rebuffed. Jesus explains that he has not yet ascended “in Trinity” (XXXIX.84). The dialogue between Mary and Jesus over the Body and Blood of Christ—their dialogue over *Corpus et Sanguis Christi*—is resolved by Mary’s declaration, “Thi loue is swetter þanne þe mede” (XXXIX.89), and the dialogue is brought to a close finally with a prayer of adoration which follows closely the formal characteristics which medieval English lay faithful would have associated with elevation prayers: “Welcome, lorde, all myn honoure, / Mi joie, my luffe, in ilke stede” (XXXIX.92-3).

All the more significant therefore is the conclusion of the York *Appearance* (XXXIX), which prolongs and intensifies the Eucharistic symbolism of the play’s beginning and middle parts. Although it is tempting to draw a connection between Jesus’ arming metaphors (lines 94-109) and the vesting prayers of the priest prior to the celebration of the Mass, Mary herself captures well the Eucharistic import of Jesus’ recollection of the events of the Passion. Honoring both His Body and Blood once more, Mary exclaims:

\[
\begin{align*}
A, & \text{ blessed body } \hat{\text{p}} \text{at bale wolde beete,} \\
\text{Dere haste } & \hat{\text{p}} \text{ou bought mankynne.} \\
\text{Thy woundes hath made thi body wet} & \\
\text{With bloode } & \hat{\text{p}} \text{at was } \hat{\text{p}} \text{e withinne.}  \\
\end{align*}
\]
To se þis ferly foode,\textsuperscript{249} 

Þus ruffully dight, 

Rugged and rente on a roode, 

Dis is a rewfull sight. 

(York XXXIX.110-13, 118-21)

With Mary’s lament in mind, a reading of the text may be richly informed by an appreciation of the devotional milieu observable in a wealth of both English and Continental examples of angels catching the 	extit{foode} of Christ’s Body and Blood at the scene of the Crucifixion. The Swansea Altarpiece is an obvious example of an alabaster altar-panel in this vein from the fifteenth-century Midlands.\textsuperscript{250} Additional examples may likewise be found in alabasters derived from a similar iconographic tradition,\textsuperscript{251} and also embroidered upon fifteenth-century English chasubles.\textsuperscript{252} The specific connection to the Mass implied in all such images is provided by the words of consecration themselves—\textit{hic est enim calix sanguinis mei ... qui pro vobis et pro multis effundetur in remissionem peccatorum}\textsuperscript{253}—words which Mary herself recalls when she says that Jesus “Spilte þus is his bloode, / For ilke a synfull wight” (XXXIX.124-5). The connection to the Mass thus appears to inhere in the text itself.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[249] Although the MS clearly reads ‘ferly’ at this line, one is compelled to wonder whether this might not be an instance of scribal metathesis. The emended line might read ‘frely foode’, as appears in other places in the cycle (notably in York XV.78). The word ‘ferly’ did on the other hand mean ‘woundrous’ and still fits the context. For definitions I am relying on \textit{The Middle English Dictionary}; also cp. York Play: A Facsimile, fol. 223.
\item[250] Victoria and Albert Museum, No. A.89: 1 to 8, 10 to 15-1919.
\item[251] Victoria and Albert Museum, No. 901.1907.
\item[253] Henderson, \textit{Missale Eboracensis}, 186: “For this is the chalice of my blood … which for you and for many will be poured out for the forgiveness of sins” (translation my own).
\end{footnotes}
Most Eucharistic in Mary Magdalene’s words is not their resonance with the play’s cultural milieu, however, although this resonance is strong. It is to be found instead in the idea that Mary can see and wants to touch the wetness of Jesus’s Body and Blood. At this point in the play, the words which Mary spoke earlier—what she says she “would do” with the Body of Christ—take on a new and very profound Eucharistic meaning: “Drye schulde I wype þat nowe is wete” (XXXIX.61). What would have been in Mary’s hands at that point, as she reached out to touch the Body of Christ? One can only imagine that she would have reached out with a cloth with which to dry Jesus’s blood.\(^{254}\) Perhaps Mary would have carried in her hand a linen like the ones glimpsed in iconography when the Body of Christ must be handled, by Mary or by Simeon, or by the First King or by Joseph of Arimathea, etc. It is not difficult to imagine that the empty tomb might have contained Jesus’ burial shroud, and that this might then have been carried by Mary away from the tomb. The play of *Christ’s Appearance to Mary Magdalene* (York XXXIX) thus offers strong evidence that the accumulation of Eucharistic symbols in the York Cycle continues beyond the York Infancy Sequence (XIV-XVII) and beyond the York *Baptism* (XXI). Such symbols—perceptible through close-reading and through imagining the plays’ symbolic extensions—now brings the discussion to the play which immediately follows Christ’s post-resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene, the York *Emmaus* (XL).

\(^{254}\) For evidence supporting this speculation, see Pamela Sheingorn, *The Easter Sepulchre in England* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1987), 135, where a paraliturgical play of the *visitatio* has stage directions indicating that Mary, after seeing the empty tomb, takes a *sudarium* or kerchief away with her from the sepulcher.
Emmaus

Just as the York plays of the Shepherds (XV) and the Magi (XVIb) each feature three characters in dialogue—three shepherds, three Magi—in a similar way the York Emmaus (XL) features three pilgrims or peregrini. In this case, however, there is one profoundly meaningful contrast to other plays featuring three characters—here, one of the three pilgrims is Jesus himself. The York plays discussed so far each culminate in a vision of the Body of Christ, i.e. with Christ’s appearance; the play of Emmaus, on the other hand, reaches a dramatic climax with Jesus’ disappearance. Unseen, or at least unrecognized (cp. Lk. 24:31), Christ has nonetheless been with the pilgrims all along the road to Emmaus. The narrative arc of the York Emmaus (cp. Lk. 24: 13-53) thus continues to explore and to develop a paradox which has been taken up by the play which immediately precedes it, Christ’s Appearance to Mary Magdalene (XXXIX). The body of Christ has been raised, but the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus’ body is not readily apparent to Mary or the pilgrims. Having their eyes opened to this miracle by yet another miracle is at the dramatic center of the York Emmaus.

As the two pilgrims, Cleophas and Peregrinus I, discourse about the events of the Passion and the report of the Resurrection, they do not see that Jesus is walking right beside them: “Why, arte þou a pilgryme and haste bene / At Jerusalem, and haste þou noght sene / What dole has ben done in þes daies?” (XL.70-2). Jesus’s reply—“Of þat werke wolde I witte … Nowe late me here” (XL.74, 76)—sets into motion the next thirty-five lines of dialogue (XL.77-112), in which each pilgrim takes turns telling Jesus about the suffering of the Savior on the cross. The dramatic
irony is rich. Not only do they tell Jesus about his own passion and death, but they even go so far as to tell him about the resurrection as well. Cleophas nonetheless expresses his doubts as well—“Awaye is þat wight,” he says somberly (XL.129)—even while he is theoretically bearing witness to the good news.

Still unaware that Jesus is with them, the pilgrims beg Him to stay. _Peregrinus I_ presses Him in particular, urging, “Bide with vs, sir pilgrime, we praye þou” (XL.144). The Lord replies: “Sir, I must nedis do as e bid me” (XL.152). The pilgrims here become, as Mary Magdalene was in York XXXIX, a type of Ecclesia expressing the desire for Christ’s presence. Thus the stage is set for the play’s climax, the moment of the pilgrims’ epiphany:

Jesus

Nowe blisse I þis brede þat brought is on þe borde.

Fraste þeron faithfully, my frendis, yo-u to feede.255

_I Peregrinus_ [To feede þeron e]nterly haue we tane entent—

Ow! I trowe some torfoyr is betidde vs!

Saie, wher is þis man?

II Peregrinus

Away is he went—

Right now satte he beside vs.

_I Peregrinus_ Beside vs we both sawe hym sitte,

And by no poynte couthe I parcyue hym passe.

(York XL.157-64)

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255 A faint echo of York XVII.b.321: “Hayll, foode þat thy folke fully may feede.”
Given the disappearance of the Lord at precisely the moment of consecration, the epiphany to the disciples at Emmaus is substantially a dramatic enactment of the moment of transubstantiation. Where could Jesus have gone? Even if He is invisible, He is still there with them; the irony is that the disciples continue to speak as though He is not present. Immediately after this moment, the pilgrims declare, “Itt was Jesus hymselfffe” (XL.166). The use of the past tense, ‘was’, implies that the disciples still fail to understand fully what has just happened. In his disappearance, they see that ‘he was’, but not that ‘he is’.

The pilgrims’ sensory testing, their empirical probing of the miracle of the resurrection through the senses of touch and sight, is constantly met with phenomenal constraints. Mary recognizes Jesus only when he shows her his wounds, after which point she can see but cannot touch Jesus’ Body and Blood. Similarly, the pilgrims cannot see Jesus’ risen body until he disappears, and even then they cannot see the Body of Christ in the sacramental presence. The vision of the Body of Christ confounds the senses, and the York Emmaus seems to suggest that the miracle of transubstantiation confounds the senses without deceiving them, since the peregrini recognize Jesus neither before nor after the moment of Eucharistic epiphany. The audience, on the other hand, sees Jesus from beginning to end, despite his disappearing act.

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256 For some ideas about how the disappearance might have been staged, see Barbara Palmer, “Staging Invisibility in English Early Modern Drama” (Early Theatre 11.2, 2008), 113-28.
The Incredulity

Following *Christ’s Appearance to Mary Magdalene* (XXXIX) and Christ’s ‘disappearance’ from the disciples in the York *Emmaus* (XL), the next play to dramatize the struggle of faith is *The Incredulity of Thomas* (York XLI). This play could hardly be better situated in terms of rhetorical dynamism: the *Incredulity* rounds off perfectly the thematic concerns of the two plays which have come before it, both of which have dealt substantially with the epistemological problems posed by a sacramentally and mysteriously hidden deity or *latens deitas*. The *Incredulity* is, in this same vein, a play which takes up the counterpoint of belief, doubt. So if the reluctance of John the Baptist (York XXI) to touch the Body of Christ forms the dramatic center of the York *Baptism*, then the desire of Thomas to touch the Body of Christ forms the crux of the *Incredulity*. If the *Appearance* and *Emmaus* take up the inaccessibility of God in the Eucharist, the *Incredulity* takes up the opposite—God’s Eucharistic accessibility, the reality that He can in fact be touched and tasted in this mystery. Thomas’ empirical, sensory, phenomenal *tastynge* or probing of the Body of Christ elaborates in turn upon the same thematic concerns which have run as an undercurrent through the preceding several plays. Paramount here is the paradox of belief: if faith should be confirmed by sense experience, it would cease to be faith at all. The Eucharist stands somewhere in between, because while it can be touched and tasted, taste and touch require what faith alone can provide.

The play opens with Peter, James, and John lamenting their forlorn state of mind. Their state of psychic distress is characterized by sorrow and fear, and by a pilgrim’s desperate hope
that “Criste oure lorde vs wille / Some socoure sende” (XLI.17-8) following the events of the Passion and the dispersal of the flock. Here at the beginning of the Incredulity, the dialogue of the three apostles is interrupted by a bright flash of light, heralding the arrival of the prayed-for and expected consolation even at the very moment it is supplicated. A bright flash also signals the arrival of Jesus in the York plays of the Nativity (XIV.79) and the Shepherds (XV.21-4).\textsuperscript{257}

At first, the apostles think they have seen a ghost. Jesus assures them, however, that they have not. Appealing first to their sense of sight, He shows them his hands and feet. Proving further his resurrection, he invites them to touch his woundes wete. Then, because the apostles still cannot believe sight or touch, He sits down to a meal with them and consumes fish and honey before them.\textsuperscript{258} The play is not clear, however, about whether even these empirical demonstrations are enough to bring about the belief of the apostles. Christ ends his discussion by sending the Holy Spirit upon them, saying, “vnto þou þe holy goste / Re[ssayu]e yow here” (XLI.89-90). Unaided by grace, not even sense experience itself will instill faith.

The play takes an interesting turn when, immediately after receiving their mission of evangelization, the apostles are met with doubt Thomas. Straightaway they are tasked with converting Thomas to a firm belief in the mystery of the Resurrection. The dramatic action seems to problematize whether it is even possible to bring about such a conversion on the basis of testimony alone. After hearing the apostles’ narration of all that the audience has just

\textsuperscript{257} The instant of illumination repeated in three different plays at the moment of an epiphany of the Lord is perhaps linked symbolically to the use of the elevation candle in medieval liturgy, a candle which was associated specifically with the major elevation of the Host at Mass. For one example, see Ayre, Figurative Roundels, 222.

\textsuperscript{258} Iconographically speaking, this moment has as much Eucharistic potential as any moment involving the use of an ‘oble’ (round, white host) or its visual equivalent. As often as a circular Host was depicted in art, the icthus (ἼΧΘΥΣ) was the next most common Eucharistic symbol in late medieval iconography.
witnessed, Thomas is adamant in his refusal to believe: “ʒa, ʒe wotte neuere what ʒe mene, / Youre witte it wantis” (XLI.165-6). In short, he is far from persuaded; and, in fact, he grows even more firm in his disbelief when the news of the Resurrection is told him by his friends and fellow apostles, who have just been commissioned to deliver the message of the Gospel.

The play of the *Incredulity* ends therefore with an interesting and paradoxical irresolution, with a shadow of a doubt about the believability of the spoken word over sense experience. Thomas must see and touch, must probe with his senses, in order to believe. The Lord’s openness to empirical scrutiny through liturgy is highlighted by a depiction of the incredulity of Thomas on the Syon Cope (Fig. 31, below), juxtaposed in the figure below against the lines from the York *Incredulity* where Thomas’ doubt is finally resolved.

Deus:

Beholde my woundis are bledand;
Here in my side putte in þy hande,
And fele my woundis, and vnderstande
Þat þis is I,
And be no more mistrowand,
But trowe trewly.

(York XLI.175-180)
Thomas’ incredulity was perhaps considered fit for inclusion on the Syon Cope (Fig. 31) because liturgy represented the medieval layperson’s chance to taste, as Thomas did, the Body of Christ. Only in the Eucharist could the lay faithful see and touch the woundes wete of the risen Lord. Yet faith is ultimately a gift, the play suggests, which is precisely the point at which only the sacramental theology of the Eucharist can adequately explain the mystery. Only in the physical encounter with the Eucharist can the average person experience the affirmation of faith by sense-experience while at the same time maintaining the authenticity and purity of faith itself, since in this mystery the senses are confounded.
Chapter VI

The Sacrifice of Isaac, *Pearl*, and *pe lande of vyssyon*

Adding to what the previous chapters have established, and extending even further the parameters of the York Cycle’s Eucharistic allusions, this chapter will examine a type of play not yet discussed in this study, namely the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22) dramatized in York X. I have set this play aside until now for at least three reasons. First, the Eucharistic implications of the York *Abraham and Isaac* (X) are eschatological in nature. Second, this play’s eschatological treatment of its Eucharistic theme has a significant bearing on *Pearl*, a poem whose central vision, drawn from the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1, 14, and 21), will be the subject of the latter half of this chapter and the beginning of the next. Third, this play and poem, respectively, will provide the best possible segue to the next chapter’s detailed discussion of late medieval English cyclic aesthetics.

The York *Abraham and Isaac* represents an Old Testament prefiguration which, like many of the plays already discussed, invites comparison to medieval Eucharistic doctrine and devotion. The first half of this chapter will provide an investigation of likely staging options for York X on the basis of action inferred from the play’s dialogue. With the substitution of the sheep in Isaac’s place serving as a hinge-point by which to open a discussion of *Pearl*, the latter half of this chapter will move on to a brief examination of a lexical parallel between York X and *Pearl* which has up to now passed unnoticed in critical discourse. The moment of the sacrifice of
Isaac invites comparison to *Pearl* and gives evidence of a correlation which is itself interesting on historical grounds. The typological context for this lexical and situational echo may reveal yet another Eucharistic dimension of both the York *Abraham and Isaac* and *Pearl*.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the medieval mystery play as a genre is its ability to sustain, in the space of a single dramatic (and therefore verbal-pictorial) narrative, several still-frames in series. Artists working in media such as stained glass or sculpture, for example, could only have depicted narratives statically, in single snapshots; so in order to circumvent the limitations of a somewhat restrictive art form, many medieval artists had to have recourse to simultaneous rather than serial depiction. While other media could not help but be synchronic, drama was allowed the luxury of being diachronic: events could unfold in drama in a unique way, as a dynamic series of snapshots. Drama allowed for a metamorphic type of dynamism, being a medium which permits one familiar image to grow naturally from another, thereby making allowance for one recognizable scene to dissolve or to rearrange itself into another, all using the same set, props, characters, and actors. The York *Abraham and Isaac* could have taken advantage of such aesthetic flexibility in a particularly excellent way.

The close of *The Fysshers and Marynars* play of *The Flood* (York IX) provides the context for *The Parchemyners and Bokebynders* *Abraham and Isaac* (X). After Noah and his family have ridden out the flood in the safety of the Ark, when all is well and they are once again

\[259\] Having been composed in the Midlands, ca. 1390-1400, *Pearl* is furthermore contemporary with the York Cycle’s early history of performance, which dates to 1376. The poem was furthermore obtained by Sir Robert Cotton from the collection of Sir Henry Savile of Banke, Yorkshire, whose library was greatly increased by the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century. All citations of *Pearl* are from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 4th ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002).

\[260\] For a particularly illustrative example of this phenomenon, see the discussion of the Barby Nativity Window in Chapter III of this dissertation.
on dry land, Noah’s First Son poses the question, “Fadir, howe sall þis lyffe be ledde, / Sen non are in þis worlde but we?” (IX.309-10).\(^{261}\) Noah’s reply—the last word spoken prior to the play of *Abraham and Isaac*—places emphasis on the need to work to earn one’s “bread and wine”:

> Nowe travaylle sall ʒe taste,  
> To wynne you brede and wyne,  
> For alle þis worlde is waste;  
> Thez beestes muste be vnbraste,  
> And wende we hense in haste,  
> In Goddis blissyng and myne.

(York IX.317-22)\(^{262}\)

The notion of laboring for one’s keep is reminiscent of the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:16-7).\(^{263}\) That the words *travaylle* and *taste* would be used of *brede and wyn* specifically gives the reader pause. The next play in the sequence will dramatize precisely what sort of “travail” is needed. The last line of York IX—*In Goddis blissyng and myne*—will furthermore be repeated nearly verbatim near the end of the next play, the *Abraham and Isaac*.

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\(^{261}\) Cp. Gen. 9:18 ffl., where no such question is posed.

\(^{262}\) Cp. Gen. 9. The narrative of the Curse of Canaan would have followed the disembarkation of Noah and his sons, had the playwright held strictly to the biblical account; but for reasons entirely understandable, the playwright has omitted this in favor of the neat ending presented by the last lines of the play. Those lines provide the segue into the York play of *Abraham and Isaac*.

York X’s action opens with Abraham delivering a sixty-four-line, six-stanza prayer of thanksgiving to God. In the first stanza, Abraham thanks God for the gift of his offspring and for God’s friendship with him and his wife Sara. In the second stanza, Abraham recalls God’s promise to make his descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; he also recalls the command that his progeny submit to ritual circumcision. Thereafter he recalls his change of name and his wife’s—Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sara. In the fourth stanza he recalls Sara’s distrust of God’s promise, his own laying with Sara’s servant, Hagar, and the begetting of Ishmael. Finally, in the last two stanzas of the play’s opening lines, Abraham comes to recall how Isaac was born as the ultimate expression of God’s favor to him: “I love [the Lord] as my life,” Abraham declares, “With all my heart and will” (X.63-4).264

Precisely at the moment when Abraham is giving thanks, Angelus appears to deliver God’s bydding, at which point an accumulation of typologically significant details begins.265 The angel commands Abraham to sacrifice “Isaak þi sone þat is the dere, / Whom þou loues our alle thing” (X.69-70).266 Not at all in diminishment of Abraham’s human response to the unwelcome message of the angel, the text goes on to enumerate several typologically meaningful details: Isaac is “Thirty zere and more sumdele” (X.82), as was Jesus at the time of the Passion; the place of sacrifice is “thre daies jornay” up “þe hill” (X.89, 147), just as it was traditionally thought that Jesus suffered three hours of crucifixion atop Mount Calvary (Matt. 27:45). The play adds to these traditional elements of the typological exposition a long discussion between father and son

265 This is not to imply that typological accretions account for the great originality of York X; in fact, such typology was to be expected. I introduce types and antitypes here rather as a segue for what will come later in the chapter.
266 See Gen. 22:2.
in which Abraham, having confessed to Isaac his own willingness to die for God’s sake, is actually able to elicit from Isaac his submission to the will of God, a narrative addition which parallels Christ’s dialogue with God the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. The dialogue is a faint echo of Jesus’ *hostiam rationabilem* or ‘rational sacrifice’ (cp. Lk, 22:42):

Abraham *I wolde be glade for hym to dye,*

For all our heele hyngis in his hande.

Isaac *Fadir, forsuth, right so walde I,*

Leuer þan lange to leue in lande.

(York X.139-42, emphasis mine)

Shortly thereafter, Abraham and Isaac leave the servants behind (X.145), just as Jesus left his apostles behind when he took to the Way of the Cross, and by X.151 Abraham has in fact given to Isaac *bis wode* made for the sacrifice. Isaac presumably carries the wood on his back as they make their way to the place of the holocaust. The following illumination (Fig. 32), reproduced from a thirteenth-century French Bible Moralisée, captures well the essential aspects of the typology implied by the York dialogue.²⁶⁷

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²⁶⁷ I include this image simply as an example of the medieval narrative type reflected in the text of York X, making no claim whatsoever as to the illumination’s circulation in England in the fifteenth century.
Although this illumination from a continental source has certain key differences from York X, such as the depiction of Christ himself exhorting Abraham in place of the angel, this example nonetheless shows one obvious way in which medieval actors might have blocked out the scene.

Noteworthy above all is the fact that all of the key elements of the typology are directly indicated by the playtext itself—the entrance into *pe lande of vyssyon* on an ass, the ‘wood’ of the ‘cross’, the hill, the altar, the father sacrificing his only son whom he loves, the youthfulness of the spotless victim, his meek submission to his suffering, *et cetera.*

Up until this point, the ‘type’ of the narrative has been the sacrifice of Isaac, the antitype the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary; but as soon as Abraham and Isaac come to the top of the hill, there is every likelihood that one static snapshot would have dissolved dynamically into another, as Abraham and Isaac debate for approximately 100 lines (X.201-301) about how best to go about the act of the immolation itself. Where would they have stood, and how would they have positioned themselves as they carried on this protracted discussion of how a father might “most perfectly” sacrifice his son? One possibility is that these hundred lines are spent with Isaac arranging himself upon the altar, both father and son delaying on account of a strong and very natural sense of fearful hesitation. This possibility opens up the additional dramatic potential of an accumulation of antitypes, so that one might add Christ in the Mass as yet another correlative. Missals of the period tend to do just this in rubrications for the Canon of the Mass. I reproduce below just one example from London, Cambridge Trinity MS B.11.11 (Fig. 33), a contemporary English Gothic manuscript which shows an illumination of the *Te igitur* page:

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269 See York X.151, 147, 159, 80, 82, 79, 103, and *passim*. Again, I do not mean to claim here that the innovation of the York *Abraham and Isaac* is its accumulation of typological details; this standard medieval typology is instead a necessary backdrop for the discussion which will soon follow. For a brief treatment of the typological significance of the story of Abraham and Isaac and its Eucharistic implications in medieval Corpus Christi cycles in general, see V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 70-5. Kolve does not provide an analysis of York X specifically, although many of his general remarks are applicable to York X.
Fig. 33. Rubrication of the *Te Igitur*. Sarum Missal.

Cambridge Trinity MS B.11.11, fol. 151\textsuperscript{270}. English, ca. 1430.

The *Te igitur* is accompanied by a depiction of the Sacrifice of Isaac because it is the section of the Canon of the Mass which calls to mind the Sacrifice of Isaac in relationship to the Eucharist:

*Supra quae propitio ac sereno vultu digneris, et accepta habere sicut accepta habere dignatus es munera pueri tui justi Abel, et sacrificium patiarchae nostri Abrahae, et quod tibi obtulit summus sacerdos tuus Melchisedech, sanctum sacrificium, immaculatam hostiam.*\textsuperscript{271} The Canon juxtaposes Abel’s sacrifice (a year-old unblemished lamb) with that of Abraham (Isaac/lamb)

\textsuperscript{270} Reproduced from Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 137. For further examples of Isaac depicted upon an altar, see Bodleian MS Barlow 53 (15\textsuperscript{th} century, English), Bodleian MS Douce 211 (14\textsuperscript{th} century, French) fol. 24\textsuperscript{r}, and Bodleian MS Lat. th. b. 1 (13\textsuperscript{th} century, English). For an example of the type’s applicability to the Crucifixion, see The Abingdon Missal (Bodleian MS Digby 227, ca. 1460), fol. 113\textsuperscript{v}-114\textsuperscript{r}, where the juxtaposition occurs as a rubrication of the *Te Igitur*. See Miri Rubin, 136-7, for a general discussion of the relevance of the the sacrifice of Isaac to late medieval Eucharistic devotion in Europe.

\textsuperscript{271} See Henderson, *Missale Eboracensis*, 188. Translation: “Deign to look upon this sacrifice with a serene and kindly countenance, and make it acceptable to you as you made acceptable the gifts of your servant Abel the just, and the sacrifice of our Patriarch, Abraham, and that which the High Priest Melchizedech offered to you, a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim” (translation my own).
and that of Melchizedech (bread and wine). This juxtaposition is brought to mind, of course, within the broader sacramental context of the Mass, where all three types from the biblical past find their antitype and fulfillment in the mystical present. It is difficult to say for sure whether such types would have come to mind for the average viewer of York X; it all depends on how the play was staged. There can be little doubt, however, that this typology would have been obvious and intended on the part of the playwright, and there can be no doubt at all as to the fact that the clergy and literati in the audience would have made the connection more or less immediately, especially given the fact that the play’s performance was an annual event.

There is some indication, moreover, that even the laity themselves might have recognized the compact unity of layer upon layer of type and antitype in this particular instance, with two events of the biblical past anticipating the sacramental present. One piece of evidence indicating a certain cultural alertness to the theological relevance of Isaac to the Mass may be found in a misericord from Worcester (Fig. 34, below) which depicts a scene similar to what may be observed the historiated initial of the *Te Igitur* (Fig. 33, above). In the misericord from Worcester, the wood which Isaac is carrying is arranged in the shape of a ‘cross’ on his back. Abraham meanwhile carries a torch in one hand (for the lighting of the ritual holocaust) and a sword in the other (Gen. 22: 6). Isaac here dons a garment remarkably similar to a cassock, wearing on his shoulders what looks like a cope with a clasp at its front. The iconography indicates that the priest is yet another antitype of Isaac.
Fig. 34  Isaac in Cassock with Cruciform Faggots.

Misericord from Worcester Cathedral. English, late 14th c. 272

Although audience recognition would have been important, the intention of the text nonetheless holds primacy of place; so whether it can or cannot be proven just how much the laity would have seen in the scene above in terms of layers of typological meaning, the evidence in favor of

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272 Reproduced from M. D. Anderson, *The Imagery of British Churches* (London: John Murray, 1955), pl. 5; also see 19-20 and 93 (ibid.) for her brief discussion of this and related images in art. In a later publication, *Drama and Imagery in Medieval English Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), Anderson discusses at length why she suspects the roof bosses of Norwich Cathedral were probably influenced by the now lost medieval plays of Norwich (see 87-104, “A Puppet-Show of the Lost Norwich Plays”). The possibility that carvings similar to the one reproduced in Fig. 36 (above) may have influenced or been influenced by drama in East Anglia strengthens the force of such evidence in the north of England, although once more I must qualify the evidence presented above as having no direct bearing on how York X was likely to have been staged; it remains an example of cultural milieu and therefore stands in relation to the present study with every caution which must accompany such evidence.
an intentioned layering of type and antitype remains important for readers who are concerned with understanding in medieval terms the precise relationship of the cycle to the feast.

In addition to the traditional typology, the play offers significant textual and dramatic embellishments at key moments in the narrative, beginning with Abraham’s pitiable hesitation in carrying out the angel’s inhuman command. The texture of the play emphasizes just this struggle by repeating the words offerand and sacrifice no fewer than eighteen times in the course of the play. Almost equal emphasis is placed upon the words ordand and comandement, as well as on just what it means to work God’s will. The thematic center and dramatic pinnacle may be found, of course, at the moment of the sacrifice itself, which offers an opportunity for yet another typologically significant visual display. The question is: what becomes the focus of the viewer’s attention at that moment of climax? Given the theme of sacrifice, it is crucial to understand the focal point of the play’s height of dramatic action, and fortunately the text has left just enough clues that one may surmise at least a few likely staging possibilities.

For the time being I will bypass the dialogue between Abraham and Isaac just prior to the moment when Abraham raises his sword against his son (X.287-301), since I will return to give a more lengthy treatment of this part of the play in the second section of this chapter. I turn now instead to the moment at which the sheep takes the place of Isaac upon the altar:

Angelus Abraham, abide …

Sla noght thy sone, do hym no mysse,

Take here a schepe thy offerand tyll,
Is sente the fro the kyng of blisse,

He biddis þe make offerand of þis

Here at this tyme, and saffe thy sone.

(York X.302-8)

Deictic elements in the play’s dialogue—‘here’, ‘þis’, ‘this tyme’—imply the actual on-stage exchange of a sheep to take the place of Isaac, and this could very well be one of the great innovations of the York Abraham and Isaac. The play was sponsored by the Parchmenters and Bookbinders, and although the reason for this has in the past been reduced to “a loose association”, I wonder whether the rationale for the guild-sponsorship in this case is not more pragmatic.273 The Parchmenters and Bookbinders were certain to have made generous use of sheep in support of their craft, and this, combined with what might be soundly inferred about the staging of the pageant, confirms the hypothesis that a lamb would have been used on stage in medieval performances of the York Abraham and Isaac.

Given what may be inferred from the play’s dialogue and its intellectual and cultural climate of typological thought, the set was also likely to have featured an altar. Had a sheep been set upon an altar of sacrifice in this context, the scene would have looked very much like all such depictions of the Lamb of God standing upon the altar in the Book of Revelation, a very common

273 Cp. Alan Justice, “Trade Symbolism in the York Cycle” (Theatre Journal 31.1, Mar. 1979), 50: Justice makes the connection between the guild and the sheep, but not between the guild, the sheep, and possible staging.
subject of art in fifteenth-century England. A wonderful example of this type of image in fact survives in the Great East Window of none other than York Minster itself. I have reproduced the image below as a point of comparison (Fig. 35). This particular stained glass window has the added benefit of having been from the same time and place as the York Cycle. The window’s essential elements—the Lamb upon the altar and two onlookers adoring the Lamb—almost certainly would have come to mind had the players placed a sheep upon an altar in the performance of York X. What is most intriguing of all, of course, is the potential of York X to have imitated an iconography such as appeared in York Minster’s depiction of the Paschal Lamb.

274 See especially Janet Backhouse, ed., The Sherborne Missal (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), passim.
After the protracted drama of Abraham’s delay—after more than a hundred lines of a father’s rightful, natural, and justifiable hesitation to turn his back on nature itself in order to fulfill God’s

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command—the moment of sacrifice and its expected tragedy dissolve into a moment of joy and relief as Abraham exclaims:

He will noght þou be dede,
But tille his laws take kepe;
And se, son, in thy stede
God has sente us a schepe.

A, sone, thy bloode wolde he noght spill,
Forthy this shepe thus has he sente.

(York X.317-20, 327-8)

Abraham’s interpretation of the sheep could have operated on several levels. The Lamb’s significance is at once literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Literally, the sheep has taken the place of Isaac, thus sparing his life. Allegorically, the sheep signifies Christ, the Lamb who was slain from the beginning of time (Rev. 13:8). Morally, this moment adjures the audience to trust in God and to obey his commands, no matter what the personal cost. Anagogically, this scene offers a proleptic glimpse of the Lamb of Revelation, whose iconography would have been nearly identical to the scene implied by Abraham’s exclamation of relief.

The play’s ending seems at first glance to be puzzling and disjointed from the rest of the play’s action, for the last lines of the play are all about the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca. After
ruminating at length on God’s inscrutable command that a father immolate his own beloved son in a bloody and appalling sacrifice, why would the play end with talk of marriage? The shift is so abrupt and so unnatural that one cannot help but wonder what the playwright must have been thinking. The playwright went a little out of his way as well in combining these elements of the story: having narrated the events of Genesis 22, the play at this point skips to Genesis 24, passing over the story of the death of Sara in Genesis 23. Theological reflection on the narrative choice shows that the play’s ending—its apparently odd juxtaposition of sacrifice and marriage—elevates rather than diminishes its poetic and dramatic achievement.

The Lamb upon the altar, set next to Isaac and Rebecca’s plans for a wedding feast, has a powerful eschatological force. The parting image is that of a sacrifice which is at the same time Isaac’s salvation and the hope of his marriage to Rebecca. Isaac, in his espousal to *pat damseyll* Rebecca, actually ‘ascends’ from the altar in an image of Christ’s marriage to his heavenly spouse, Ecclesia (Rev. 19: 6-9). The sacrifice of the Lamb therefore has at least three valences of semiosis: it recalls the paschal lamb of the Old Testament in the ancient Jewish celebration of Passover; it also symbolizes the suffering of Christ in his Passion, an oblation to God the Father; and it also prefigures the Lamb of the Celestial Banquet in the Book of Revelation. Each semiotic valence is the basis for Eucharistic wonder. The same complex of theological images is, moreover, at the very heart of the Middle English *Pearl*, to which I turn now for a detailed comparison to the York *Abraham and Isaac*. 
The Middle English *Pearl*, of British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x, became part of the library of Sir Robert Cotton late in the sixteenth century, after it was acquired from the library of Sir Henry Savile (d. 1617) of Banke in Yorkshire.\(^{276}\) Much of the history and origin of the manuscript remains unknown prior to the change of ownership, but it is at least certain that *Pearl* was found in a Yorkshire library which was substantially comprised of volumes recovered “from the northern monasteries” at the time of the dissolution.\(^{277}\) Although E. V. Gordon locates the manuscript’s dialect near the border of Staffordshire and Cheshire, the argument has also been made for a northern provenance for the poem on the basis of its frequent use of northern dialectal forms.\(^{278}\) Scholars and editors of *Pearl* are agreed in dating the poem to the last quarter of the fourteenth century or thereabouts. The poem’s earlier date, ca. 1375, would place the poem contemporary with the earliest record of pageant wagons being stored at York,\(^{279}\) whereas the poem’s later date, ca. 1400, would place the poem very near to the completion of the glazing of

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\(^{277}\) See Gollancz, *Facsimile*, 7. See also *The Manuscripts of Henry Savile*, 4, and the entry for Sir Henry Savile of Banke (1568-1617) in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 51, 118. Especially interesting is Watson’s brief discussion: “Since the Savile manuscripts comprised so many from the northern monasteries one is tempted to speculate about the religious sympathies of the family and to wonder whether, if they were adherents of the old religion, some element of piety lay behind their acquisition of these volumes” (4).

\(^{278}\) Coolidge Otis Chapman observed in 1932 that *Pearl* has a high percentage of Norse and Scandinavian words in comparison to contemporary texts from the Midlands, and thus he arrived at the conclusion that the poem’s place of origin was in fact the East Riding of Yorkshire where such linguistic attributes might be explained by the demography of the locale’s fourteenth-century inhabitants (see “The Authorship of *Pearl,*” *PMLA* 47.2, 1932, 352 especially). Gordon and Tolkien assigned the poem to the Northwest Midlands in general, citing (among others) Chapman. See Gordon, *Pearl*, xliv-xliv.

York Minster’s Great East Window in ca. 1408, roughly contemporary with the first recorded compilation of the complete list of pageants in the York Cycle, the *Ordo Paginarum*, in 1415.\(^{280}\)

In addition to there being historical grounds for comparing the *Abraham and Isaac* (York X) to *Pearl*, there are also aesthetic grounds for comparing the scope and semiotics of the York Cycle to the poems of BL MS Cotton Nero A.x.\(^{281}\) Recent editors of the *Pearl*-manuscript, Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, have perhaps put it best in their description of the poem *Cleanness*, a description which fundamentally applies likewise to *Pearl* and *Patience*:

*Cleanness* is … by no means the loose collection of heterogeneous stories yoked clumsily together that it has often been thought. The main narrative sweep is a chronological one, from the fall of Lucifer down to the end of the Babylonian domination of Israel; the realization that the main biblical stories were interpreted by medieval Christian commentators as types of the Last Judgement … blends with the pervasive consciousness of the throne and court of God in heaven, to impart a grand design to the poem which is reminiscent of a Corpus Christi play in miniature.

(Andrew and Waldron, *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 24-5)

In addition to the scope of *Cleanness* being in a sense comparable to the scope of the York Cycle, *Cleanness, Patience*, and *Pearl* are each biblical without being mere versifications of the


\(^{281}\) *Cleanness* and *Patience* in particular; and, to a much lesser extent, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. 
Bible. Each one shares with the plays of the York Cycle a certain way of handling biblical material, an aesthetic which re-casts biblical stories in a manner which fits its respective genre, poetry or drama. In the poems of MS Cotton Nero A.x and the York Cycle, we therefore have a certain case of proximate provenance, the possibility of nearly contemporary composition, and comparable treatment of biblical and theological material.

It is crucial to emphasize here that *Pearl* and the York Cycle also share very many affinities of theological, aesthetic, and intellectual sensibility. The parallels with the York *Abraham and Isaac* in particular offer a mere starting point for what could certainly become a long study of these works’ historical and aesthetic relationship. Similar to the extent of biblical paraphrase which characterizes the plays of the York Cycle, almost the entirety of *Pearl*—more than seventy-five percent of its lines, by E. V. Gordon’s reckoning—is made up of biblical paraphrase. Where *Pearl* describes the Heavenly Jerusalem in 1212 lines, representing formally the idea which it expresses, the York Cycle similarly had twelve stations on its route, the numerological significance of which is suggestive even if it is undiscoverable. Taken altogether, the range and variety of the *Pearl*-poet’s output shares several affinities with the York Cycle as a whole. Both treat biblical material in semiologically subtle and inventive ways, while neither one adheres strictly to what is narrated in the Bible itself. Both seek to synthesize several biblical narratives under one thematic strain; both make use of rhymed alliterative verse; both

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282 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* meanwhile shares a certain semiotic complexity with the plays of the York Cycle. See *SGGK* 619 fll., for example, for a description of Sir Gawain’s shield and its ‘five fives’.
share what may be described as a summist or all-encompassing theological sensibility; and, finally, both are cyclic in character.

_Pearl_ is all at once a framed narrative, a versified biblical paraphrase, and an allegorical dream-vision. The poem tells the story of a somnolent man who, having fallen asleep upon a hilltop, dreams of his recently lost and much-longed-for beloved—his two-year-old daughter—who, meeting her father on the banks of a river separating this world from the next, carries on a theological debate about the role of faith and works in Christian soteriology. Although the prototype for the vision is the Book of Revelation, it is primarily the setting and not the plot which has been drawn from Scripture. Just as John is ‘caught up in spirit’ to behold a vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, so too is the Dreamer in _Pearl_.  

When the Dreamer sees his daughter in this dream-vision, he remains on earth while she is in Heaven. The whole dramatic dialogue revolves around the epistemological tension between knowing by sight versus knowing by touch or experience, for although the Dreamer is able to see her, he is nonetheless unable to embrace her because of the river which stands between his shore on earth and her shore in Heaven. The river, the Maiden-child tells him, signifies baptism. On the other side of the river is the Heavenly Jerusalem, and within the confines of the city is the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, described in a manner which reflects a keen awareness of the sight’s Eucharistic dimension. “Mylde as maydenez seme at mas” (_Pearl_ 1115), the 144,000 virgins solemnly make their way to the Celestial Banquet. Seized by desire, the dreamer tries to cross the baptismal waters near the end of the poem in order to join his _Pearl_-maiden in the

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285 See _Pearl_, line 61; cp. Revelation 1:10.  
286 See _Pearl_, ll. 139-140, 625 fll., and 653.
procession of 144,000 virgins to the Heavenly Feast. He is suddenly startled from his dream-vision when he is unable to make the crossing; he awakens, utterly transformed by the experience of the debate and vision, and the poem concludes with the Dreamer commending his lost Pearl to God in a final stanza whose allusion to the moment of the elevation at Mass is complemented by the stanza’s imitation of the form of the elevation lyric.

*Abraham and Isaac* (York X) and *Pearl*

On the surface, York X and *Pearl* appear to treat two very different subjects. The first is a play about Abraham and Isaac, the second a poem at whose center is a vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Both works are nonetheless centrally concerned with a similar event—the sacrifice of a child for the sake of salvation in adherence to God’s unsearchable command—and both reach their moment of climax in an oblation which has strong Eucharistic resonances. The Dreamer in *Pearl*, having been roused from his slumber at the very instant he attempts to cross the river to join the Maiden, awakens to reflect on the meaning of the debate and vision. He concludes that it is vanity to strive against the will of God, or even to do the slightest thing contrary to God’s favor. This newfound wisdom allows the Dreamer, once was doubled over in misery, to suffer now, as an oblation to God, his separation from the one he loves. *Pearl* closes with the Dreamer’s prayer of offering.
In York X, Abraham comes to a psychic state comparable to that of the Dream in *Pearl*. Just prior to raising his blade against his child, Abraham concludes that it is useless to contravene the command of God; then, as Isaac beseeches his father to make of him a perfect sacrifice, Abraham commends Isaac to God in a manner nearly identical to the formula used by the Dreamer in *Pearl*. The clear textual echoes in the Dreamer’s and Abraham’s respective sentiments are self-evident when select lines are set side-by-side.

### Pearl

Lorde, mad hit arn þat agayne þy striven,  
Oþer proferen þe oþt agayne þy paye.  
To pay þe Prince oþer sete sæȝte  
Hit is ful eþe to the god Krystyin;  
For I haf founden Hym, boþe day and noȝte,  
A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin.  
Ouer þis hyul þis lote I laȝte,  
For pyty of my perle enclyin,  
And syþen to God I hit bytaȝte,  
In Krystez dere blessing and myn,  
Þat in the forme of bred and wyn  
Þe preste vus schewez vch a daye.  
He gave vus to be His homly hyne

### Abraham and Isaac

It is Goddis will, it sall be myne,  
Agaynste his saande sall I neuer schone,  
To Goddis cummaundement I sall enclyne,  
Ar non to God more boune  
Then is I and my wyffe,  
For frenshippe we haue foune.  
Farewele, in Goddis dere blyssing  
And myn, for euer and ay.  
That pereless prince I praye  
My offerand heretill haue it,  
My sacryfice þis day
Ande precious perlez vnto His pay. I praye the lorde ressayue it.


(Pearl 1199-1212) (York X.243-5, 10-12, 295-301)

Although the examples excerpted from York X are presented above out of the order in which each set of lines appears in the play itself, it is striking that every sentiment expressed in the excerpt from Pearl has a direct correlation to sentiments expressed by Abraham in York X. What could possibly account for such a correlation? Can it be mere coincidence that every thought articulated in the last fourteen lines of Pearl finds a correlative expression somewhere in the York Abraham and Isaac?

Further investigation demonstrates that situational and lexical commonalities are complemented by stylistic ones, i.e. by similarities in prosody. The rhyme-scheme of Pearl’s twelve-line stanzas—\textit{abab abab bcbc}—is similar to that of York X’s twelve-line stanzas—\textit{abab abab cdcd}. The last four lines of each stanza in York X are noticeably shorter than the previous eight as well, giving York X a faint stylistic echo of the bob-and-wheel stanza which is the signature form of \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight}. Although such correlations appear on the surface to be in themselves significant, there is nonetheless a danger in making too much of them; dozens of additional stylistic correlations could be found in the York Cycle alone, not to mention the entire corpus of fourteenth and fifteenth-century poetry and drama. Given the other factors at play in this particular case, however—similarities in history, theology, aesthetics,
dramatic situation, etc.—even more problematic would be the diminution of lexical correlations where so much else is held in common between the poem and the play.

Satisfied to leave such observations as they are—as suggestive but not probative indications of historical co-occurrence or influence—it is a relief to be able to suggest with a much higher degree of confidence that the most substantial correlation between Pearl and York X, and indeed between Pearl and the entire York Cycle, is not on surficial stylistic grounds but rather on a commonly shared theological sense, a kindred semiology, a shared aesthetic. These more substantial commonalities will thus become the subject of the remainder of this chapter, and to a great extent the pursuit of this dissertation’s concluding chapter as well.

*Pe Lande of Vyssyon*

Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac is set, significantly, in *pe lande of vyssyon* (York X.86). The phrase in Middle English is a translation of the Vulgate’s account, where the Angel commands Abraham to take Isaac *in terram visionis* (Gen. 22:2). *Pearl* is likewise set in another kind of ‘land of vision’. In literary terms, *Pearl* as dream-vision imitates John of Patmos’ dream-vision recorded in the Book of Revelation. In theological terms, *Pearl* culminates in a vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, i.e., in a *vision* of the Beatific Vision. One of the most remarkable features of comparison between *Pearl* and York X is thus the fact that each one closes with the image of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. The Eucharistic character of this vision in York X having been
explored in the first half of this chapter, it now remains to be seen how this vision or something like it might also be reflected in *Pearl*.

Although the debate over *Pearl’s* Eucharistic allusions has been a long one, dating back to 1918, Heather Phillips has convincingly argued that the poem’s combination of images and allusions offers a coherent meditation on the Eucharist and its place in soteriology and the medieval Christian conception of the Beatific Vision. More may nonetheless be said about *Pearl’s* Eucharistic allusions, for there is at least one allusion which has up to now escaped notice in critical debate. A brief discussion of *Pearl’s* final reference to the Eucharist will show how the York Cycle and *Pearl* employ similar strategies for signaling the thematic centrality of the sacramental Body of Christ.

The final stanza of *Pearl* is the poem’s last and greatest Eucharistic allusion. As Norman Davis has observed and published (at the recommendation of J. R. R. Tolkien, no less), the phrase *In Krysteʒ dere blessyng and myn* (*Pearl* 1208) was a formula commonly used by parents saying farewell to their children in the Middle Ages. Davis’ observation thus appears to confirm that the relationship between the Dreamer and the *Pearl*-maiden was a parent-child

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relationship, a point on which E. V. Gordon and J. R. R. Tolkien were insistent.\textsuperscript{289} Recognizing that the poem’s autobiographical dimension is historically undiscoverable at this time by means of any known surviving evidence, it must be admitted that the claim that the poem’s closing is an expression of actual human loss is beyond the limits of interpretation. Either way, it is an echo of the reality of such a loss. The fact that Pearl closes with a formula which was commonly used by parents saying farewell to their children amplifies Pearl’s similarity to the York Abraham and Isaac—both are centrally concerned with the sacrifice of a child and the psychic healing brought about by re-imagining that loss in the context of the Eucharist.

What more might therefore be said about the final stanza of Pearl? Is there anyway to guage accurately or fully the poem’s aesthetic use of this formulaic blessing? It is almost as though the whole complex of emotion of the entire poem—the expression of loss, the debate, and the vision of Heaven—is neatly summed up in this final articulation of the Dreamer’s inner resignation and abandonment to God’s will. I quote here the final stanza of Pearl in full:

\begin{quote}
Ouer þis hyul þis lote I laȝte,
For pyty of my perle enclyin,
And syȝen to God I hit bytȝe,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{289} There exists some ambiguity in the line of the poem which indicates the nature of the Dreamer’s relationship to the Pearl-maiden: “Ho watȝ me nerre þen aunte or nece” (Pearl 233). Tolkien, with his characteristic dislike of strict allegory, perhaps urged Davis to publish this re-affirmation of the relationship between the Dreamer and the Pearl-maiden in order to give further evidence of a claim which is made by Gordon and Tolkien in their introduction to their own edition of the poem; namely that the elegy represented by the poem is in all likelihood drawn from actual events, which if true would make the poem semi-autobiographical (see Gordon, Pearl, xiii ff.). The difficulty with such a claim, naturally, is that it is entirely unproveable, given the fact that history has left a blank in place of the Pearl-poet’s signature. For an in-depth theoretical treatment of this and similar critical problems, see Chapter II of this dissertation.
In Krystez dere blessing and myn,
Þat in the forme of bred and wyn
Þe preste vus schewez vch a daye.
He gave vus to be His homly hyne
Ande precious perlez vnto His pay.

*(Pearl 1205-12)*

The Dreamer puts into words the consolation he finds in offering his loss to God in the context of the moment of the elevation at Mass. The Dreamer does so, however, using a formula which, in addition to being typical of medieval farewells, is also typical of medieval English elevation lyrics. In fifteenth-century elevation prayers, the phrase *in the forme of bred* is even more common than the anaphoric use of the salutation “Hayll.”²⁹⁰ Not only is this an observable fact, but even the poem itself indicates in its very next line that the moment of the elevation is the appropriate context within which to interpret the poem’s final stanza. The Dreamer commends his sacrifice in Christ’s blessing, an expression which he immediately contextualizes with an allusion to the major elevation of the Host at Mass.

The final stanza of *Pearl* thus gathers into itself the whole of the poem’s dramatic debate and narrative in the single image of the elevated Host, which in turn reflects the composite whole of the mysteries explained by the Maiden in the debate itself—the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, the nature of soteriology, and the procession of the 144,000 to the Paschal

²⁹⁰ See especially the many examples collected by R. H. Robbins in “Levation Prayers in Middle English Verse” *(Modern Philology* 40.2, Nov., 1942), 131-146.
Victim in the Celestial Banquet. The Dreamer sees in the elevated Host the sum of all that has transpired—his personal loss, the debate with the Maiden, and the land of vision which he has tried to lay his hands upon. If this symbol is Eucharistic, it is Eucharistic in the most universal way possible: it is the summation of all of the poem’s thought and feeling about the human condition and the hope of salvation. What precisely does this entail? At the human end of the spectrum, it entails the whole complex of emotions associated with a father’s loss of his child. The divine or theological end of the spectrum is another matter, however.

The Dreamer has by this point run through a lengthy debate with the Pearl-Maiden over the extent to which works and prayer factor into salvation. He has been puzzled to see the Maiden there in Heaven—and crowned queen no less—despite the fact that when she passed away she was not even old enough to say the Creed (Pearl 485). The Maiden explains, however, that the grace which flows from the Paschal Lamb—not the intensity of the believer’s faith, as the Dreamer supposes—secures salvation. The vision which she shows him shortly thereafter is the vision of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, which looks remarkably like the celebration of an eternal Eucharistic liturgy. At the center of the Heavenly Jerusalem there stands an altar, and upon that altar the Lamb in statu victimali bleeding into a chalice, and towards that Lamb the procession of 144,000 virgins makes haste in an eternal liturgy. The sight of his daughter in the procession compels the Dreamer to rush the river. In the end, the Dreamer must be satisfied with the mere vision of the Beatific Vision.

The ability of this final stanza to draw into a compact unity the whole complex of theological debate which the poem has just rehearsed is precisely the point of semiotic similarity
which constitutes *Pearl*'s strongest comparison to the York Cycle. If one were asked what precisely is entailed by the mystery of the Eucharist according to the medieval poem *Pearl*, one would have to remain for a long time ruminating over the long list of the poem’s Eucharistic accumulations before ever venturing a tentative answer. Should a single answer eventually come to mind, it might only come in the form of yet another question: if one views the sacrament of the Eucharist from the stand-point of the Dreamer’s dream-vision, what mystery would *not* be contained in the Eucharist? The Eucharist is the sum of all mysteries.

The many connections so far suggested as linking the York Cycle to the Eucharist thus have an aesthetic and semiotic cousin in *Pearl*. All such connections go a very long way in establishing how several of the York plays constitute a deliberately crafted commemoration of the Feast of Corpus Christi. Chapters Three and Four have demonstrated how instances of paronomasia involving the word *foode* in the York *Nativity* (XIV), *Shepherds* (XV), and *Magi* (XVIb)—when read in the context of medieval elevation lyrics and weighed alongside evidence from intellectual, cultural, and devotional milieu—highlight serially the Eucharistic dimension of the York Infancy Plays. Chapter Five has employed a similar methodology in order to demonstrate how the York *Baptism* (XXI), *Christ’s Appearance to Mary Magdalene* (XXXIX), *Emmaus* (XL), and *The Incredulity of Thomas* (XLI) dramatize various epistemological and phenomenological obstacles to belief, ultimately putting forth the Eucharist as the mystery which resolves doubt by rendering God accessible to sense experience. Chapter Six has been concerned with ways in which the Eucharistic implications of biblical mysteries in the York Cycle was not confined to the New Testament alone, but was in fact an important part of the York *Abraham*
and Isaac (X) as well. The extended comparison of the York Abraham and Isaac to Pearl has demonstrated that the Eucharistic semiology of the York Cycle has at least one analogue in late medieval English poetry. Thus a broader comparison of the poems of MS Cotton Nero A.x to the whole plan of the York Cycle may be a promising area for future investigations of the cyclic aesthetics of the York Cycle, which may be very well be akin to the aesthetic plan of several of the poems of the Pearl manuscript.
Chapter VII

Conclusions

In re-evaluating the Eucharistic allusions of the York Cycle and *Pearl*, this study has avoided two narrowly focused either-or ways of approaching Eucharistic signs and symbols. First, this study has avoided pursuing whether these works confirm, deny, or enact the doctrine of transubstantiation as defined by the Catholic Church at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.\(^{291}\) The question of Eucharistic orthodoxy is an important one, of course; but the physics of the mystery of the Eucharist, as important as they may be, are not the cardinal point on which the Eucharistic meaning of the York Cycle or *Pearl* ultimately rests. Second, this study has avoided pursuing whether these works’ treatment of the Eucharist may be considered ‘orthodox’ or ‘heterodox’—inasmuch as modern scholarship can in any way even approximate the fifteenth-century understanding or even usage of such terms.\(^{292}\) In the narrowing of the debate to a pair of mere disjunctives, past studies have lost something indispensable—the set of assumptions which playwrights and audiences were likely to have brought to their reception of such fifteenth-century artistic achievements as the York Cycle and *Pearl*. Cultural milieu is thus one lost key which this dissertation has sought to recover.

With the aid of evidence culled from material culture, this dissertation has demonstrated ways in which the York Cycle and *Pearl* give dramatic, literary, and poetic expression to Eucha-

\(^{291}\) For a contrasting approach, see King, *York Mystery Cycle*, 21.
ristic piety in late medieval England. The plays of the York Infancy Sequence—the *Nativity* (XIV), the *Shepherds* (XV), *Herod* (XVIa), and the *Magi* (XVIb)—manifest a sustained interest in the Eucharistic dimension of the events of Jesus’ infancy. In one way, Eucharistic concerns are signaled linguistically by the keyword *foode*, an instance of paronomasia which runs throughout all four plays; in another way, such examples of paronomasia are amplified by recognizable imitations of the genre of the elevation prayer, as has been observed in the prayers and praises of Mary and Joseph at the Nativity (Chapter III). This study has thus extended the findings of previous research by showing that a Eucharistic reading of the Nativity scene is furthermore corroborated by evidence in the York Missal and by a comparison to the liturgical art which survives from the period. Some art from the continent has likewise opened up the possibility that moments previously dismissed as being of little importance—the adoration of the ox and the ass, for example—are probably Eucharistic in character as well.

One of the clearest examples of the Infancy Narrative’s engagement of Eucharistic devotion is of course to be found in the Adoration of the Magi (Chapter IV), which in certain ways may have eclipsed even the Nativity itself in its Eucharistic symbolism. Medieval liturgical embroidery, the *Lay Folks Mass Book*, the fifteenth-century xylographic book *Biblia Pauperum*, and the Kings’ twelve salutations patterned after medieval elevation prayers: all such evidence has demonstrated ways in which the Adoration of the Magi is especially rich in Eucharistic signs and symbols. The possibility that the Three Kings could have brought specifically liturgical vessels to hold their oblations, or that they may in fact have been dressed in priestly or diaconal vestments, is a historically, thematically, and textually grounded approach to imagining how the
scene might have been staged in one or more instance over the course of the cycle’s two-century-long history of performance. The chapter which has treated the question of the Eucharistic dimension of the York Magi has amplified the evidentiary grounds for supposing that such scenes would have resonated with a wide variety of Eucharistic allusions implied by the text but not explicitly alluded to therein, given that stage directions are lacking.

The pre-Passion play of the Baptism (York XXI) and the post-Resurrection plays of Christ’s Appearance to Mary Magdalene (XXXIX), the Supper at Emmaus (XL), and the Incredulity of Thomas (XLI) have likewise added several layers to an already multivalenced study of the York Cycle’s Eucharistic allusions (Chapter V). Each play has brought its own reflection on the Eucharistic facet of the mystery enacted therein. John’s reluctance to touch the Body of Christ is a moment whose Eucharistic character is strong without being obvious. The homage John does to the mystery of Christ’s Body is analogous to the religious sentiment reflected in the celebrant’s daily prayer of preparation for the Mass in the York Missal, and John’s homage also reflects a variety of trends observable in works of art of the period which capture and express the popular imagination of the scene and its relationship to the sacramental Body of Christ. Mary Magdalene’s declaration of blindness in the sight of the face of her Lord’s risen body—“I see thee not!”—is an especially vivid dramatization of the probable popular reaction to the teaching about Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist. The Supper at Emmaus, with its enactment of transubstantiation itself, signals the place of such an articulation of the Real Presence in the narrative arc of the York Cycle. Even though the disciples witness the very moment of transubstantiation, they still do not see the sacramental Body of Christ in the mystery
of Jesus’ ‘disappearance’. Following the disappearance of Christ’s body in the play of the Supper at Emmaus, the Incredulity of Thomas examines the experience of doubt in the Real Presence of Christ’s Body and Blood, and also the resolution of that doubt by empirical ‘testing’, thereby bringing to completion a post-Resurrection sequence of plays which, like the Infancy Sequence, manifests a sustained interest in the sacramental Body of Christ.

The York Abraham and Isaac (X) also enacts a dynamic picture whose scenes unfold in a manner which can most fittingly be described as paschal (Chapter VI). Beginning with the picture of Abraham receiving the doubtful command of the angel, the play evolves to present a sequence of events which would have been recognizable to a medieval audience as a dramatization of a familiar typology wherein Abraham becomes a type of God the Father, Isaac a type of Christ the Son, and the altar on the hilltop a type of the cross on Calvary. At the play’s climax, this image is suddenly transmuted into an icon which is at once paschal, eschatological, and Eucharistic, following the pattern of the image of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb depicted in the Great East Window of York Minster. This final image of the Paschal Lamb is strikingly similar to the central image of Pearl, a poem which shares affinities with York X, most especially in the juxtaposition of a paschal sacrifice alongside a wedding feast.

The Old Testament play of Abraham and Isaac has furnished a surprisingly strong connection to Pearl in terms of provenance, lexis, and dramatic climax, which further justifies the interpretive methods employed in the analysis of these plays’ Eucharistic allusions. Evidence brought to bear on York X from the Bible Moralisée, rubrications in the Sarum Missal, the text of the York Missal, wood-carving in Worcestershire, and stained glass in the Great East Window
of York Minster has culminated in the observation that the lines wherein Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac in York X show striking parallels to the lines uttered when the Dreamer in *Pearl* presents his final commendation of his Maiden to the Paschal Lamb, a prayer of resignation which echoes the medieval genre of the elevation prayer. Such a strong correlation as this raises the question of whether further study of the historical, aesthetic, and theological connections between *Pearl* and the York Cycle might yield additional evidence to suggest that both works partake of a broader renaissance of Eucharistic devotion in the north of England which may have flourished from ca. 1375 until ca. 1475 or a little thereafter.

By the process of investigation outlined above, Eucharistic allusions have been shown to have had a likely reception as such in many of the plays of the York Cycle— in the *Flood* (IX) *Abraham and Isaac* (X), the *Nativity* (XIV), the *Shepherds* (XV), *Herod* (XVIa), the *Magi* (XVIb), the *Baptism* (XXI), the *Appearance to Mary Magdalene* (XXXIX), the *Incredulity* (XL), and *Emmaus* (XLI)—as well as in *Pearl* and in the many works of art discussed as evidence of the cultural and aesthetic milieu of the York Cycle. These findings indicate that the York Cycle manifests something much closer to a consistent and sustained engagement of Eucharistic doctrine and devotion than has previously been thought.

The best context for understanding the York Cycle’s Eucharistic allusions is its broader semiological system, which is possible to rediscover in part by cross-referencing interdisciplinary evidence in order to establish the likely assumptions governing the creation and reception of the plays themselves. Looking to just such cultural evidence for a better understanding of the York Cycle’s cyclicity, the next stage of research along these lines will
include an investigation of the Eucharistic aspects of the remaining plays in the cycle, most especially the York Passion Sequence (York XXV-XXXVI). Further research on the nature of cyclicity itself as a medieval concept and construct will likewise prove to be fruitful grounds for future work, for the aesthetics of cyclicity may hold the key to understanding how the wide variety of Eucharistic allusions in the York Cycle form a diverse yet unified celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi.
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