

The York Series of Mystery Plays...For All Time?

By Jenni Bartram, Merchant Adventurer

The accepted form of the plays in the current York Series are as collated by the late Canon John Stanley Purvis and are based on the mid-15th century manuscripts stored at the British Library and form a series of biblical stories as used during the Medieval period. Narrative (if not theme) in early productions were changeable for each set of plays (then as now including director's variations) but probably reached a more formulated production in the mid fifteenth century before the religious changes of the sixteenth century determined the plays just as unnecessary as the wonderful pictures, including the "Dooms" often found on the walls of the churches and they were forbidden to be performed.

Pictures and religious plays were teaching methods for a mainly illiterate society and by the reign of the first Elizabeth regarded as 'Popish' practices of an earlier era to be whitewashed over and with printed versions of the Bible available to more than just the parish priest and as installed in each church, concentration on the literal word became paramount.

The York cycle of plays were performed in the Medieval period as now by different groups of the business community of the city. Each play belonging to a different trade or profession. These groups at that time were members of Guilds, a form of trade restrictive and protective practice whereby you were licensed to your master in a trade as a child, an apprentice initially then a journeyman and in time a master of your trade, all taking many years to achieve. You could only legally practice such trade as a member of your Guild. The secrets of your trade were mysteries in which you were initiated during the long training period required. It is that skill or "mystery" from which the plays of the Guilds take their name....Mystery Plays.

So, each Guild possessed a special play which it performed as part of the cycle of plays. The plays were performed by processing to various parts of the city upon the feast of Corpus Christi which took place in May/June of each year. Actors and audience would have known each other well so the atmosphere would have been lively and the wealthier guilds would no doubt have invested a little more into their costumes and props for the entertainment and marvel of their co-citizens. There would have been much rivalry friendly or otherwise. Musical instruments would be played, the drum and pipes would call the busy citizens from their homes, the town markets, taverns, and conversations. To all there would also have been recognition of the stories and events from the Bible enlivening the imagination, an angel host here to pray to and admire and there a red Devil with his cohorts from Hell to jeer and fear.

The Guild of Our Lord Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary was founded by a group of influential York citizens in the first part of the 14th Century as a religious hospital and place of charity and prayer. They commenced the building of the Hall around 1357 becoming as time passed the Company of the Merchant Adventurers connected with the same guilds in London and Bristol.

They were Merchants who adventured across the North Sea to Hamburg to trade in the Baltic and to the Low Countries now Belgium, the Netherlands and France. They traded Yorkshire goods and produced wool, amongst other items for fine cloth and goods from far away.

Trading also, no doubt, information during the turbulence of the fifteenth century of the Wars waged between the houses of York and Lancaster. To the Merchants of those times, prayer to the Almighty, support of the poor by hospital services and charity was a sacred duty and necessary to ensure your ship did not founder before discharging its valuable cargo or returning with goods to market at home. It was a world of light and darkness, of war and peace, famine and generous harvest, health of balance of the four humours and deadly plagues. When God was in his Heaven all was well with the world. Standing in our ancient hall you can almost catch their chatter, jests, and bartering.

The Merchant Adventurers play is the Last Judgement, matching the "Dooms" depicted on the walls of churches and Guild chapels. The time when God comes in glory with his heavenly hosts and Jesus Christ, our link to his Heavenly Father, looks to choose and intercede for those who have lived good lives, who pass to Purgatory and then in time to heavenly bliss, whilst sending the lost sheep to Hell, to be teased by the Devil and all his demons. Consider the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch! It would have been the last play in the cycle and conclude the performance so as now would always try to make its mark on the imagination, human imperfections, and frailties of its audience.

Whilst considered by many, in this day and age, to be a tribute to our cities Medieval past and a cultural delight, how is our play and its fellows relevant to our age? We live in a society that considers itself more scientific than supernatural in its actions and beliefs but a recent World pandemic, starvation in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Afghanistan, turbulent world politics and threats of warfare are common sadly to both the Medieval mind as well as our own.

Whilst we are blessed or perhaps cursed by instantaneous media rather than gradual rumour and tales of terror, each age feels swing of the wheel of fortune and of change. Life gives no certainties. Life can be just as brief and brutal but we see it mainly now through the television lens less through direct effect, or do we? Climate change sees storms, flooding, heat that can grow vineyards or in excess, kill. We still have much to learn in our development of medicine for both mental and physical health. Our large companies and businesses still support by charitable giving and provision of services and education and provide a living for others.

The court of public opinion and media advise and rule upon acceptable behaviour, divide the sheep from the goats?! The Church of England gifted to us by the Tudors still endures as does our monarchy, descended from the Plantagenet rulers of Medieval England. Many beliefs share our religious world in the twenty first century but they are there still.

Our merchants are still here, the businesspeople and entrepreneurs of our times, the Scriveners, the Butchers, the Builders, the Freeman of the City, and many others. The past, a foreign country, the present, a brave new world? Perhaps instead it is an eternal circle linking both and the plays relevance lies in the continued fragility of man in his subservience to the elements and continual intellectual and theistic doubts. The Last Judgement is a concern and truth for all times. What is our legacy, corporate or individual? Are we the sheep or the goats? The Samaritan or the man who passed by? Will you stand up and be counted? Community or self. Eternal truths.