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Staging the Passion:

the representation of the Passion scenes of the Chester and York mystery cycles in their contemporary context

by

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Abstract

The most effective preaching has application to the everyday lives of its audience, presenting the faith in a way that is pertinent to the audience's situation. In the late Middle Ages, the great cycle plays of Chester and York carried a strong didactic message by presenting the story of mankind from Creation to Doomsday with reference to the contemporary situations of their audiences. The Passion plays at the heart of the mystery cycles dramatised the story of the redemption of mankind in order to make its significance clear and relevant to fifteenth and sixteenth century audiences.

The purpose of this thesis is to study information about the staging of the plays and to examine some aspects of the contemporary surroundings of their audiences which would have been relevant to their reception of the plays. Through a study of the Passion plays of the Chester and York cycles in the perspective of their contemporary contexts, this thesis investigates ways in which the staging of these plays might have contributed to the presentation of the plays' didactic message. The aim of the thesis is to bring a fresh perspective to our current understanding of the presentation of the cycle dramas.

This study considers the way that three major preoccupations of the Late Middle Ages have been incorporated into the cycle dramas. A study of Christ's identity in the Holy Week plays presents the subject of kingship, often also incorporating the idea of service, particularly in the play of The Last
Supper, while the plays of the trials of Jesus become the opportunity for a comparison between Christ's trials and contemporary law trials.

Following the first two chapters, the play of the Crucifixion provides the occasion for a discussion on the violence which was endemic to medieval society, in the context of the medieval cycle plays. All these themes are treated in the plays with reference to contemporary circumstances and events and popular iconography.
Acknowledgments

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