Corpus Christi, Superstar? Decoding the Enigma of the York Mystery Cycle*

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Abstract

The York Corpus Christi plays were a trade guild or "Mystery" series of medieval pageants that venerated the body of Christ during the summertime feast of Corpus Christi. The pageant cycle persisted for over 200 years and reflects a strong devotion to the spiritual and communal benefits. In this paper, I discuss connections between the medieval understanding of sight as experience to present the Corpus Christi plays as a form of extra-physical communion, where participants were able to experience the Eucharist by attending and participating in the pageant cycle.

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The York Corpus Christi plays (also known as the "Mystery Cycle" for the connection to the trade guilds[1] or "mysteries") originated sometime around 1370 in the city of York, England. They are recognized by medieval and dramatic scholars as key "monuments" in the development of literary playwriting and dramatic staging during the late Middle Ages (Beadle x). The pageants[2] were held in honor of the Roman Catholic feast of Corpus Christi, a Church midsummer festival that celebrated the "Real Presence of the Body of Christ in the Host at Mass" (Beadle x). One of the festival requirements included an outdoor processional involving the elevation of the Host (the consecrated bread) carried by a priest, where laity and clergy followed in devout reverence in order to "venerate" the Eucharistic bread and stimulate devotion to both the church and the Catholic Faith (Davidson, "Introduction") The Corpus Christi pageants were similarly structured: processions, presented on wagons, moved through stations set up throughout the town. This processional served as a way for citizens to participate in a religious and cultural celebration where the "'invisible things' of the divine order 'from the creation of the world' might be displayed . . . in order to bring these things into the orbit of the collective memory" (Davidson, "Introduction"). Each pageant and the entire play sequence celebrated the Eucharistic act and the life of Christ through showcase and spectacle.

I argue that the involvement in the pageants served a multitude of purposes, benefiting both the guilds who sponsored them and the audiences who participated in them. Although some scholars, such as Alan Justice, argue for a link between guild assignments and the themes of the sponsored pageants, and other scholars, such as Clifford Davidson, suggest that participation by the community was a civic and charitable duty, a combination of these views seems more likely. Since pageants were sponsored by the guilds, sponsorship could act as a means not only of self-promotion but also of fostering community goodwill and, by operating as a form of charity, a meaningful spiritual act toward moral salvation. Similarly, the audience received moral and spiritual benefits, not only from attending the performances but also through the process of viewing itself. In this paper, I begin by offering an overview of the history of the pageants in order to contextualize them for a contemporary audience. My next section discusses medieval understandings of the moral and spiritual benefits of putting

1. Medieval trade guilds, organized by craftsmen or merchants, were formed for the mutual benefit of members, occasionally resulting in monopolies but also in the standardization of quality for certain goods and services, as well as setting and upholding consumer expectations of trading practices and guild integrity.

2. According to Meg Twycross, an entire cycle denotes a "play," whereas individual sessions were called "pageants" ("Theatricality" 11).

on the dramas, and my concluding section offers an overview of the medieval act of seeing in order to frame an argument for a type of proxy communion. This concept of "seeing" as "experience" suggests that, through the act of viewing, the medieval audience was provided with a proxy-experience of the act of Holy Communion merely by watching the pageant and seeing the Body of Christ.

The History and Themes of the York Mystery Cycle

When studying the impact of religious drama on guilds and audience, the risk arises of a static understanding of the dramas that ignores how the pageants would have changed over two hundred years. The history and complexity of the cycle, however, gives some indication of the dynamic impact of religious drama on medieval communities over this period. Today, 47 extant pageants survive from the York Cycle from the original 50. The entire text of the cycle is contained in a volume known as the *Ordo Paginarium*. It lists, in detail, the guilds involved with each play, noting any changes in guild possession of a pageant, revisions to the pageant texts themselves (such as when the Passion sequence was reworked by the anonymous author known as the "York Realist"), or any complaints issued by the guilds.

Like most medieval drama, the Corpus Christi pageants are biblical in nature and present a series of moral imperatives to the audience. The liturgical calendar rather than the Bible, however, organizes the order of events, beginning with the fall of angels from heaven and concluding with the final judgment (King, *City* 8). The cycle focuses on a redemption narrative, not a "historical" narrative, following "a common medieval pattern [that was] imposed on history" (8). Although the average layperson of the time had some working knowledge of Latin, most lay people probably only knew the Bible in terms of the worship or liturgical cycle.[3] The 1600s saw a rise of the return to orthodoxy in the sacrament, a "reaffirmation of the doctrine of transubstantiation" and a "vogue for devotion of the sacrament at the altar" in the Medieval Church (9). These trends can be seen not only in the subject matter of the liturgical worship during the period, which has a thematic pattern of fall and redemption, but also in the selection of liturgical materials integrated into pageant content. The thematic content relies heavily on discussing the Ten Commandments, the Fourteen Articles of Faith (the Apostolic Articles of Faith, or the "Apostle's Creed" with seven articles for the Godhead and seven for Christ), the Seven Sacraments, the Seven Corporeal Works of Mary, and the Seven Spiritual Works of Mary.

The thematic significance of such broad subject matter, ranging from creation

3. This theme can be observed by examining the York liturgical missals from the time period.

to final judgment, emphasizes the "element of the broken covenant between God and Adam, and the nature of the new covenant [between Christ and mankind] . . . grounded in Lenten themes of penance and reciprocal forgiveness" (King, *City* 57). Each pageant was carefully constructed with brief, attention-grabbing openers, and some even took textual liberties, deviating from the Bible. One deviation includes a conversation Eve has with the serpent in the garden during *The Expulsion from the Garden*, followed by Adam and Eve's expressing deep sadness for disobeying God, communicating a need for atonement (57). Such adaptations provided a different dimension on the "standard" biblical stories the audience would have known while also providing a strict moral objective. Pageant 22, *The Temptation in the Wilderness*, features a surprising twist when the "Devil" directly addresses the audience. He asks, "Make rome, belyve, and late me gang / Who makis here all this thrang?"[4](Davidson, *Temptation* 1-2). This address serves as an attention-getting device designed to refocus the audience's attention prior to discussing Satan's fall from heaven before his attempted temptation of Jesus. In this instance, it is likely the question served more of a practical purpose than a narrative one. On a festival day, it seems safe to assume that not everyone would watch every single play passing along the pageant route. Several scholars (such as Twycross "Places," Davidson; others) suggest the possibility that not all 50 pageants were put on every year, as it would have been impossible to do so. Regardless of the function, direct address is an innovative device for plays of this type during this particular time period.

Furthermore, the plays thematically sought to hammer home the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual components of Jesus. This was communicated through his visceral image as well as his teachings and precepts. In the pageant Abraham and Issac, the *Ordo Paginarum* notes that the individual playing the "Isaac" of the pageant ought to be young and resemble Christ as much as possible. This is used as a device to allow the audience to make connections between the biblical figures. For example, during the scene of sacrifice in the play, Isaac asks to be bound. This request serves as visual symbolism and is typologically symbolic of the Passion sequence (King, *City* 65). These denotations in the *Ordo Paginarium* serve as intentional reflections of the church's strong imperative to highlight the significance and relevance of the Passion for churchgoers as well as the importance of venerating the image of Jesus. These elements served as a means to evoke a strong personal and spiritual connection with the audience.

The exact origin date of the mystery cycle is unknown, but the first official

4. "Make room, quickly and let me go; / Who here makes all this noise?" (Davidson, *Temptation* 1-2).

record of pageant wagons appears in the town's *York Record Book* in 1377 and again in 1387 (Beadle xxi). By 1394, a city ordinance referred directly to the pageants themselves, so a start time around the 1360s seems likely. Pageant plays on wagons were hardly a new phenomenon: cities such as Bruges, Antwerp, Leuven, and Brussels commonly held "tableaux vivant"-style pageants paraded on wagons, which may have inspired affluent tradespeople from York (Davidson, "Introduction"). By 1415, the ambling, pageant style wagons (which were propelled by men rather than beasts) were fully employed by the people of York with an additional mandate from the city that each station should be marked with a banner bearing the city's coat of arms (Davidson, "Introduction"). A 1398 ordinance indicated there would be twelve stations for the wagons to pass through, perhaps modeled on the Catholic convention of the Stations of the Cross.[5]

The plays began as early as 4:30 a.m. on the morning of the festival. During the earliest years of the celebration, the feast and pageants were held on the same day. However, after years of delay and issues with crowds becoming unruly the two events were separated, with the feast and festival held on one day and the pageants on the following (Twycross, "Theatricality" 12). The first pageant, *The Creation of the Angels and the Fall of Lucifer*, was presented by the Barkers (leather tanners) at Mickelgate station before the play would move on to the second station, where they would start the process over again, and the second pageant, *The Creation Through the Fifth Day* (by the Plasters), would begin at Mickelgate (12). The plays varied in length, ranging from 10 to 40 minutes, and the geographical layout of York created an ideal setting for a day filled with the theatrical productions.

Putting on the Play: Benefits of the Corpus Christi Experience

While many questions remain about the exact nature of the staging of the pageants along the pageant route, some questions can be answered given extant material found in the *Ordo Paginarium*. These answers reveal much about the interwoven, complex nature of guild promotion and charity, as well as how the feast of Corpus Christi rendered promotion and charity mutually exclusive. Trade and merchant guilds sponsored the construction of their custom built pageant wagons, sometimes quite simple in their construction, sometimes quite elaborate with multiple "stage" layers. While no artifacts survive of the actual wooden wagons, detailed written descriptions remain in the *Ordo Paginarium*. For an example of the best guild marketing and pro-

5. While the Franciscan Order initiated this liturgical practice in 1342, it did not become fully adopted into all churches until the mid-1500s, but there is evidence to support its use and practice at York in the late 1300s.

motion practices, the Mercer's (i.e., Grocer's) *Last Judgment* pageant wagon warranted a detailed description in the *Ordo Paginarium* of its opulent appointments, complete with "winching gear" to lower God from heaven and a "hell mouth." The elaborate design of the staging, saved for the final performance of the pageant route, was meant to leave an impression with the audience. The God character had a special "brandreth of iron" that Richard Beadle surmises acted as a fire basket "with four ropes in the corners, in which he came and went from heaven" (xx). For heaven, the Mercer's Guild outfitted the sky with red and blue clouds, stars, sunbeams, and a rainbow, as well as mechanical angels to "run about in the heaven" as per the stage directions (xx). The wagon was, by all intentions, the "best of the best," creating a fantastic scene to wow the audience with its spectacle while also showcasing the wealth and success of the Mercers as a guild. In 1463, the Mercers upgraded their pageant wagon so that souls could "rise" out of it; in 1501 they had a new one built that lists a "hell-door, windows, angels, an iron seat, several pulleys, and a cloud" (xxi).

A great deal of the pageant was, in fact, about self-promotion and wealth accumulation: the annual production of the pageants was funded by pageant silver collected by pageant masters who "produced" the play in the modern sense (Twycross, "Theatricality" 11). These masters were separate from the guilds, yet served as an ultimate authority to decide which guilds would participate in each year of production. Being included in the annual production was a great honor: Inclusion afforded an annual opportunity to promote a guild both in terms of the services and wares of the guild and in terms of helping to elevate that guild's status in the community. Yet the Guild system in York during the period of the pageants underwent significant alteration thanks to shifts in economic structure, population fluctuation, and political and social upheaval. Heather Swanson presents the medieval craft guild as a fraternal organization that focused on the regulation of industrial relations, serving a clear political and administrative purpose in the Medieval oligarchical structure (31). Swanson further illustrates how "craft guilds can be seen as a deliberate and artificial construct of medieval urban authorities" (31). A reduction in the overall population, declining from 11,000 at the close of the 1300s to a low of 8,000 in 1600, resulted in lowered taxes, decreased building development, and a decline in the number of overall rents collected (BHO, "Economy"). In evaluating the guilds' trade registry (where all guild freemen were registered and noted), a marked downturn occurred for all trades in the 1500s due to the rise in "professional trades" such as lawyers, clerks, and scriveners

(BHO, "Economy").[6]

This decline in guild membership, as well as decline in the overall population, meant that paying the pageant silver became increasingly more difficult—and the added expense of putting on the pageants became burdensome for many. The pageants were funded through a system of fines divided between the pageants and the city; in order to keep the feast day pageants afloat, wealthier guilds often had to contribute to the pageants of less economically fortunate guilds, and the refusal to pay—or even a disdain against authority when speaking out—was treated as a rebellious act (Davidson xxii). Despite the fact that the costs of the pageants were often high in a town where the birth rate did not match its death rate, as well as the fact that the economy was clearly not flourishing, the Corpus Christi pageants continued with widespread support for nearly 200 years until they were suppressed (Davidson, *Corpus* 16). As Davidson argues, non economic

> factors in any case outweighed economics. The play cycle, while it depended on the skills of the crafts for its wagons, costumes, and stage properties, was successful and long lasting because it tapped into the religious climate of a city which, though apparently not universally pious for its time, nevertheless held firmly to a conventional but strong belief in the efficacy of the rights and practices of traditional Christianity. (18)

Therefore, the merchants of York were willing, at great expense, to perpetuate an activity due to its religious significance and apparent spiritual benefits. The financial expense, in other words, did not compare to the moral cost of ceasing production of the plays.

Because each guild was assigned pageants as part of their "self identity and their perception of their participation in the larger reality of salvation history" (Davidson, *Corpus* 21), the guilds would have the required materials for certain props or the means to display their wares and, therefore, would have advertised their products during the pageants (Davidson, "York Guilds" 21). This display reflects some of Miri Rubin's argument that the participation of the guilds advanced the personal interests of the guilds themselves, acting as a form of "conspicuous consumption" through "lavish displays" (197). Some assignments featured thematic relevance (for example, *The Flood* for the Shipwrights) or showcased a guild's products or wares. In the case of the Mercers, who put on *The Last Judgment*, the pageant afforded an opportunity to

6. The causes of such a downturn is likely due to a recession in the wool trade industry that unseated York as the highest economy, excepting only London, in England (BHO, "Economy").

reflect the guild's prominence in the community, showcase their merchandise, and reveal the significance of their craft.

The Mercer's placement in the pageant program, as the grand finale after a long day of pageants, provided a symbolic representation of the guild's import—both materially and symbolically—to the community. Alan Justice connects 23 pageants with their "demonstrable associations" to their crafts or services, and he offers a tenuous association with another six (48). The remaining pageants, while not having a clear association, were perhaps chosen for circumstance or honored placement—since being involved in the Corpus Christi pageants processionals was not only a civic honor but a great charitable contribution as well.

Charity, Salvation, and the Medieval Act of Seeing

A strong push for alms giving by the medieval church, motivated by economic declines in the 12th- and 13th-centuries and rampant poverty, increased the visible efforts of charitable giving by churchgoers. The medieval concept of caritas, while referring to the love for and of God, could also be performative for the devotee—it could reflect one's love and devotion to one's fellow man (Davis 936). This aspect of perfomative charity could be tied to showing goodwill and generosity to others but also through elaborate efforts such as participating in the Corpus Christi pageants. Charitable acts were understood as acts of mercy rooted "in scriptural and patristic thought that emphasized the responsibility of all Christians to perform charitable works," which directly related to the six corporal works of Mercy (937). This message was furthered by the doctrines of Ambrose and Augustine, who advocated the idea that "almsgiving had the capacity to erase sin and deliver the almsgiver from death" (936). In this respect, the Corpus Christi plays served as a form of charitable work that offered an ideal opportunity to secure moral goodwill and earn the potential eternal salvation for those that put on the plays. The guild members, in essence, believed their involvement with the plays acted as a charitable contribution to their community that might "buy" them an easement of sin and the promise of heaven in the afterlife as a form of indulgence.

Charitable acts and giving fall under the tenants and teachings of Jesus and serve as recurrent themes within the texts of the pageants. Consider the Seven Corporal Works of Mary (or "Works of Mercy" as they are known in contemporary Catholicism): feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, visit the prisoner, and bury the dead—all count as clearly charitable acts. The Mercers's play in the pageant, as discussed by Kate Crassons, focuses on the act of

almsgiving, placing "special emphasis" on the importance of aiding the hungry, sick, and naked, evoking again the Seven Corporal Works of Mary (308). Jesus reappears in this pageant wounded, crucified, and emerging

> as symbol extending beyond his own sacrifice on the cross to encompass the poor as well as the wider community to which they belong, Christ draws attention to the suffering he endured for humanity. Questioning the community's commitment to charity, he asks his people: How have you sacrificed for me? How have you sacrificed for one another?. . . The play begins by evoking the memento mori tradition so as to remind the audience members of their own impending death. (Crassons 308)

In many ways, *The Last Judgment* is a pageant imbued with lessons on how to commit acts of charity and live a good, Christian life. Christ directly addresses the audience to remind them of these precepts, suggesting that one should always hear and respond to those in need, just as God had heard mankind's need and delivered unto Earth His son:

> When any that nede hadde, nyght or day
> Askid you helpe and hadde it sone
> Youre fre hartis saide them nevere nay
> Erely ne late, mydday ne none
> But als ofte sithis as thei wolde praye
> Thame thurte but bide and have ther bone.[7] (Davidson, *Doomsday* 310-15)

The illustrative point here is that, according to "Jesus" and thus the Church, the most charitable individuals or organizations were always willing to give. During night or day, their hearts gave freely and never denied another human in need. Crassons rightfully illustrates that this is an important point for the time period, where "this extreme version of generosity opposes the kind of painstaking concern that drives theories of discriminate almsgiving, theories that seemed to be rapidly becoming the norm in late fourteenth and early fifteenth century England" (308). The importance of such a distinction in appropriate almsgiving stemmed from anxieties regarding a

7. "When any that would need, in either day or night
Asked [the Lord] (for) help and (was given) a son
Your free heart (or free will) would never deny
Not early in the morning nor late in the evening
But all of this truly, as they would pray,
They need not but endure and have their requests." (Davidson, *Doomsday* 310-15)

rise in the population of abject poor and a collective societal questioning of how one should give alms to others. Selective almsgiving mandated that "a person must be physically disabled . . . lame, blind, or feeble to be considered deserving of alms" (310). Despite this, *The Last Judgment* lacks criteria for establishing who is or is not worthy of receiving charity. Christ consistently refers to the need of the hungry, sick, and naked but otherwise does not offer any other precept for who qualifies for charitable acts, encouraging generosity to and from all.

But it is not enough to think of staging the pageants themselves as the only charitable act. The medieval audience itself received clear moral and spiritual benefits by attending the plays. Davidson and Katherine Walker discuss these positive impacts through the understanding of the medieval act of seeing. Walker discusses the combination of spoken word and visual performance as an opportunity for audiences to "contemplate internally the meaning of Christ's sacrifice" where the pageants' "continual call for spectators to listen, imagine, and remember encourages medieval audiences to move beyond the immediate visual presentation to a more contemplative state" (Walker 170). Davidson reveals how, in the Middle Ages, seeing was "in fact commonly identified with touching. The eye might even be regarded as joined to that which it sees. And seeing also could be a channel that, through faith, might lead one to access God's grace" (*Corpus* 37). Much of the medieval theory of vision is later clarified by Roger Bacon, who originated the idea that vision originated with an object that "sends its visible qualities through the intervening air to the observer's eye" (Miles 97). Walker clarifies this concept, bringing in the scholarship of Suzanna Biernoff and her *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*, noting that "in the middle ages sight was an embodied practice that involved a transmission of rays from one material object to another and influenced the body of the devotee" (179). This concept of seeing and touching stemmed from classical understandings of the "active eye": the Aristotelian belief that the eye received input (intermission) and that, through sight, the "visible object was able, in this way, to assimilate the eye and soul to its nature and essence, a tangible contact and change that was commonly understood on a popular level" (Woolgar 22).

Walker rightfully argues that it is Jesus's direct gaze that serves as his "direct address" to the medieval audience, thus making an indelible impression. This is a significant element not only because of the intimacy of the gaze but also because of the figure (Jesus) who presents the look. Walker's argument allows for a platform of entry for what I would like to present as a type of spiritual transformation undergone

by the spectator when viewing the York pageants. If the Medieval audience understood sight as physically transformative, then the very act of watching the pageants and seeing religious iconography brought to life through the physical embodiment of Jesus, particularly in his life and death, would have served as a very powerful emotional and religious experience.

As previously discussed, the Corpus Christi Feast is a celebration of the Eucharist, and the medieval audience understood the Eucharist in social terms, defining it as "the sacrament of duty towards others, the sign of unity, the bond of charity" (Crassons 305). The Corpus Christi plays themselves offer reminders of almsgiving and charity, serving as echoes of the Lenten season of sacrifice and giving where "Christ's body and blood forge the bonds of community and remind people of their obligations to treat others with generosity and love" (306). Taking this one step further, there is also a very physical manifestation of the Eucharist: the embodied personification of Christ in the form of the "bodily Christ" in the plays, where

> the body/bodies of Christ breathe, speak, and look in front of an audience of crowded bodies . . . [serving] a devotional role, one in which vision plays a key function. In this case, to perform Christ is to both physicalize and to fictionalize him. . . . The performing of Christ momentarily blurs for the audience the distinction between actor and savior, role and divine incarnation. (Walker 173)

"Seeing" Christ made his presence real and felt by the audience, but this was amplified by the presence of the physical Eucharist itself. The body of Christ, as blessed bread, was on display and celebrated throughout the Corpus Christi Feast. Most medieval people rarely actually partook in communion. Instead, the body and bread were put on display at Mass, and it was through the eyes that devotees practiced the spiritual act. To encourage this habit, churches elevated the Eucharist to become of even greater spiritual import, such as showcasing the Body and Blood on an altar surrounded with candles or by celebrating the processional of the Host through the crowded streets as it was elevated above the head of the priest. This process of Elevation had "become a true substitute for communion for the laity" and resulted in Mass becoming "essentially a voyeuristic experience" (King, *City* 21). Consider, for a moment, the fact that the medieval laity took communion once a year yet attended Mass up to three times a day, and that the act of transubstantiation was a "miracle" that could only be performed by a priest: a miracle performed during the Elevation

rite. There are multiple examples of the Elevation rite within the York pageants that expressively mirror scenes in the Nativity pageant, as discussed below. Medieval English Elevation lyrics all have a form of greeting and usually open with "hail" or "welcome." In this way, Christ was liturgically "being greeted in person as his presence reaffirmed the active bond between heaven and earth, the forgiveness of sin guaranteed by his sacrifice which was about to be re-enacted by the celebrating clergy" (King, *City* 21). Consider the parallel of the Nativity with the consecration of the host, as Mary greets her newborn son with the Elevation lyrics typically used during the blessing of the Eucharist:

> Hayle my lorde God, hayle prince of pees
> Hayle my fadir, and hayle my sone
> Hayle souereyne sege all synnes to seese
> Hayle God and Man in erth to wonne
> Hayle, thurgh whos myth
> All Þis world was first begonne
> Merknes and light.[8] (Davidson, *Nativity* 57-63)

King convincingly argues that, in this play, the Virgin Mary functions as a sort of priest-like figure able to "bring forth" God: Mary "gently but firmly [lifts the baby] above her head with both hands while uttering her words of greeting, in explicit imitation of the celebrant of Mass" (*City* 24). If we are to view moments such as these as symbolic of the Eucharistic act itself, as I argue, then perhaps they held even greater purpose than reminding both audience and guilds to commit acts of charity daily. The pageants, then, might have served as a type of Eucharistic act in themselves. While we see repeated acts of and requests for charity, we must also consider the references and emblematic aspects of Jesus as a living, breathing representation in the pageants. This presentation is not unlike looking up at the illuminated elevated host at Mass. During the course of the pageant cycles, the audience witnesses the miracle of the birth of Jesus with an abundance of light imagery, where it is told in *The Nativity* that Christ was "born of a Virgin, the sun of a star/A sun knowing no setting, a star always shining, always bright" (qtd. in King, *City* 101). Here, just as the sun produces a ray,

8 "Hail my lord, God and the Prince of Peace
Hail my Father and Hail my Son.
Hail sovereign man, all sins to cease
Hail god and man on Earth as one
Hail, through whose might
all peace in the world was first begun
Darkness and light." (Davidson, *Nativity* 57-63)

the Virgin produces a son in the same way. These light-based descriptions are paired with accompanying stage directions: when Joseph returns to the manger, he notices light shining from the stable, important because "Christ's coming is [represented] as an influx of light" (101). Light imagery is tied to Christ, and the Christmas Liturgy makes adamant the connection between the salvation and the ingestion of the host as celebrated at Mass, as witnessed through the York Missal: "Grant to us Lord, we beg, to be refreshed by considering again the Nativity of your only begotten Son by whose celestial mystery we are given food and drink" (qtd. in 102).

If we know there is a clear connection between seeing and the body, between seeing these Elevation prayers and rites and the act of Communion and the Eucharist, it is not so far removed to imagine that the pageants themselves were, in some respect, rites that could have served as a form of ceremonial communion. After all, the priests of the day told parishioners that just looking upon the host was akin to taking communion, for "it was considered out of the question that the laity should receive communion more than occasionally, so regular Eucharistic worship for them focused on the need to look upon the consecrated Host only" (King, *City* 16). Indeed, this act of "just looking" had a multitude of powers, from "a reduction of pain in childbirth, and from toothache, a day's guarantee of not going hungry, going blind, dying, or even aging, of finding work easy, and having all sorrows cured" (18). The act of looking upon Christ in the pageants, with Christ-figures as a representative of the "real" Jesus, may have provided a spiritual renewal greater than what we could possibly imagine today. This, possibly, is why the Corpus Christi pageants persisted for nearly two hundred years despite economic distress and population decline, for the possibility of a mystical and spiritual resonance went beyond mere spectatorship from the audience and community engagement by the guilds. The participation in and experience of the York Corpus Christi plays potentially meant a chance of getting closer to the divine, a spiritual connection even more visceral than the experience of Mass. It was akin to a sacrament, a festival and a religious rite so entwined with both civic and spiritual identity that the York community continually asked for the return of the plays even after their suppression.

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