

Department of English & Writing Studies

**City and Stage: Medieval Drama in England**  
**English 4120F (001)**  
Fall/Winter 2016-17



**Instructor:** Prof. Anne Schuurman  
[anne.schuurman@uwo.ca](mailto:anne.schuurman@uwo.ca)

**Date/Time:**  
Wednesday 12:30pm-  
3:30pm

**Location:** Stevenson Hall 2166

Course Description

What was English drama before Shakespeare? In this course, we will answer this question by leaving the theatre and exploring the fascinating world of medieval York, a walled city once inhabited by the Romans, situated where the Ouse and Foss rivers meet, in Northeast England.

The York Corpus Christi Play is made up of forty-seven surviving individual plays or “pageants” depicting key scenes from the Bible and Christian salvation history. It is traditionally associated with the feast of Corpus Christi, the church holiday celebrating the doctrine of the Eucharist. This “cycle” of plays was produced and performed, not by professional theatre companies, but by the people of York—the civic government and its citizens—on Corpus Christi day for approximately 200 years, from 1376 until 1569. The surviving text of the complete play exists on one manuscript which was copied sometime between 1463 and 1477. We do not know who wrote the pageants.

Our in-depth study of the play will combine literary analysis with explorations in medieval history and religion. We will interpret the pageants by comparing them to the Bible stories they dramatize, in the context of the social and material world in which they were performed, and through the lenses of performance theory. The guiding questions of the course will include: what is the difference, if any, between a religious play and a religious ritual? What was everyday life and work like in medieval York? What was so important about the feast of Corpus Christi that it merited a thirteen-hour long dramatic performance—an event that involved the participation of the entire city and great financial cost? To what extent did the church control the theological message of the play? How much input and influence did the craftsmen and ordinary people have? What were the religious and historical factors that led to the production of the play in the first place, and what were the factors that led to its demise?

Course Materials

**Required Texts:**

*The York Corpus Christi Play*. Ed. Clifford Davidson. TEAMS Middle English Text Series. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011.

*City and Stage: Medieval Drama in England*. Custom Courseware.

The Bible. Any of the following versions are acceptable: NRSV, NIV, King James (Authorized or 21<sup>st</sup> Century), Douay-Rheims.

Various readings and online resources available on the course website.