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'The Best Paper Assignment *Ever!*' Teaching Medieval Drama Through Writing

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# **"The Best Paper Assignment *Ever!*' Teaching Medieval Drama Through Writing"**

**by Christina M. Fitzgerald**

In Spring 2010, I had the pleasure of team-teaching a course on medieval drama "then and now," in its historical contexts and in modern performance. I collaborated with a colleague in the Department of Theatre and Film at the University of Toledo, Dr. Edmund B. Ligan. That course was associated with a concomitant performance of selections from the Chester Cycle here at the University of Toledo, a portion of which we took to Toronto for the performance of the complete cycle in May, 2010. Though our students were not members of the cast and crew, we still linked the course to the performance through various assignments in which the class members served as assistant dramaturgs for the production.

However, it is not always the case that I am able to work with the resources of the Theatre department or with the expertise of practicing theater professionals such as Dr. Ligan, who is a director as well as a theater historian. Often I am on my own, teaching medieval drama to English majors in an English department, as I suspect many other people who teach medieval drama are. But I still want students to move from the page to the stage, and to think of the cultural contexts of performance in the past and in

our present, especially since so much of medieval drama's richness is only apparent in the fullness of its cultural and historical contexts. Thus I have devised various writing assignments to teach and encourage students to think contextually. This essay discusses the major project I have assigned in my undergraduate medieval drama courses in the department of English at both UCLA (where I earned my Ph.D. and taught as a Lecturer) and the University of Toledo, where I am now an Associate Professor of English. I include a revised version of the assignment guidelines in the appendix to this article. The title of this essay, "The best paper assignment *ever!*," is a direct quotation from one of my Toledo students on the day I passed out the instructions that semester. Another student followed it up with a more accurate, if less decorous comment: "Yeah, thanks for not giving us a sucky assignment." My assignment is probably not the best *ever*, but I do agree that it does not suck, and that it has been, in fact, an effective and fun assignment, for both my students and me, and thus I share it here, along with an analysis of what I think has made it successful.

In short, the assignment I gave asked students to imagine themselves as the producer/director of a performance of medieval drama in the present day who is seeking funding from a local arts organization, and who thus needs to write a detailed proposal of the project, its artistic vision, and its potential to engage a modern audience. Students had the choice of imagining either a "historically accurate" production (to the extent that that is possible), including appropriate medieval staging, to be performed

for a modern audience, or a creatively modernized production, with freedom to use any staging contexts (though I encouraged students not to use a proscenium arch stage unless they could justify it). My goals in this assignment were to create a variation on "problem-based learning" for medieval drama studies (minus the group collaboration usually associated with that method)<sup>[1]</sup>; to engage students in the material in a way that would help them put what they learned to active use; to encourage close reading and contextual thinking; to promote creative problem solving and research skills; to foster a sense of medieval drama as potentially living theater; and, of course, to cultivate a deeper appreciation and understanding of the richness and complexity of medieval drama as a cultural, aesthetic, and historical object of study. That the students generally reacted with pleasure to the assignment was gratifying, as well, since pleasure usually leads to greater engagement.

Although my reasons for assigning a research- and writing-based project over an actual performance were as much practical as pedagogical, there are also sound pedagogical reasons for asking students to write their way from page to stage. Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs have long stressed the effectiveness of "writing-to-learn," a process that emphasizes using many short, impromptu, and informal assignments throughout the course.<sup>[2]</sup> Although the writing-to-learn practice emphasizes first and foremost "expressive" writing meant mostly for the private working out of ideas, rather than more public "transactional writing" meant to

communicate ideas (to use James Britton's terms), and though it refers largely to shorter, more informal assignments, I nevertheless see this medieval drama project as belonging to the continuum of learning to which writing-to-learn programs and practices belong. Although the final project is ultimately "transactional," communicating a particular vision for a performance of medieval drama to an imagined audience, students nevertheless have to use writing to reach an understanding about what is potentially happening on the page and to be able to translate it to action on the stage, a process of learning that I reinforce throughout the semester through the kinds of informal exercises usually associated with writing to learn. And in designing the project, I aim to follow the five principles of effective writing assignments, as generally espoused by WAC programs, here enumerated by the editors of the WAC

Clearinghouse ("Five Principles"):

- Tie the writing task to specific pedagogical goals.
- Note rhetorical aspects of the task, i.e., audience, purpose, writing situation.
- Make all elements of the task clear.
- Include grading criteria on the assignment sheet.
- Break down the task into manageable steps.

Perhaps because of the time I have spent teaching official WAC courses, I have taken many of its pedagogical goals into my regular, upper division literature classrooms, including the medieval drama course.

One of the reasons I rely so much on the processes of WAC instruction, even in upper division courses for English majors, is that medieval literature in general

challenges students so much, often requiring them to jettison what they think they know about reading, responding to, and analyzing literature. Dramatic literature, too, challenges the English major not used to moving from the page to the stage, distinguishing between text and performance, or filling in the gaps in play texts light on detailed stage directions and heavy on assumptions about an audience's horizon of knowledge and expectations. Medieval drama, then, poses a double challenge, or even a triple challenge, once we add the difficulties of unmodernized Middle English.<sup>[3]</sup> A medieval audience might have encountered the drama we read as either a performance or as a text for private reading, but in either case, a medieval audience member or reader would have had a rich visual context for understanding or imagining the text. A medieval reader or viewer was likely familiar with devotional practices that asked readers to imagine themselves playing part in the living image and "performance" conjured in readers' minds, or that provoked deeply affective responses to performance. That is, both devotional reading and what Jill Stevenson calls "performance literacy" in late medieval culture called for readers and viewers to *enter into* the texts they experienced. My students generally do not share these practices and habits of mind when it comes to literature and performance. For them, the text, the "show," or the film is separate from them, defined by its covers, its curtains, its proscenium arch, and, generally, by its named author, whose intentions they still often seek to know and see as unique and inviolable.<sup>[4]</sup> Given the difficulties for students in learning how to read and

interpret medieval drama, and understanding its foreign ways of functioning vis-à-vis audience, I have developed my assignments to teach and reinforce these new ways of thinking about the text (on the page and on the stage) and about one's relation to it as reader, performer, or viewer.

Students are also not acquainted with the broader cultural contexts of medieval drama, contexts that I believe are necessary to fully understand how that drama functioned then, and how it might produce meaning in modern performance. Those contexts include the intellectual horizon of expectations of audiences and readers and influences on the creation of this body of drama: vernacular devotional texts, visual art, music and liturgy, lyric poetry, saints' lives, apocrypha, and so forth. I certainly draw on such contexts and bring examples into the classroom such as the Bedford Hours illustrations of Noah's townhouse-like ark.<sup>[5]</sup> But "contexts" also means the social and economic pressures on the plays, and the social and cultural meaning of the staging: who were the communities and people who financed, performed, and watched these plays (that is, when we know as much)? Was a given play or cycle of plays performed in a city? Rural areas? By guilds? By parishes? By a manor community? Was the play on pageant wagons? Fixed scaffolds? A single scaffold or many? Was it a traveling text or did it involve a traveling troupe? Was it played in sacred or profane space? I ask students to think about how all these contexts—intellectual, cultural, social, and economic—might have contributed to the plays as we have them, as well as how these

contexts interacted with and produced a play's meanings in performance, as opposed to on the page only. In addition to that historical framework, "contexts" also means for me the perspective of the classroom and 21st century American college student life (which itself has many manifestations), and modern expectations of what "theater" and "drama" are (both anachronistic terms for medieval plays) and how and where they are performed. I ask students to think about how we are always going to be separated from these plays by such different contexts despite our deep study of them. We talk about how the plays will always "mean" differently to us, no matter how hard we try to take them on their own terms. For instance, my students and I often find the devils and vices funny, and perhaps the medieval audience did, too, but perhaps their laughter was more nervous than ours. In that difference, however, lies a lesson about the various ways laughter serves as release in dramatic art, or how humor is historically determined; thus, in that very difference lies an intellectually or even ethically fruitful encounter.

There is also the matter of how modern audiences are trained to receive drama more passively than the medieval and early modern audience might have done. Ritual signals now call for polite behavior from the audience—from curtains to reminders to turn off cell phones—and, except in more avant-garde performances, the audience sits, while the actors move, putting on a "show" for the audience. Moreover, modern audiences have often paid in advance to see the play, thus creating an expectation of the

play as a consumer entertainment good, no matter how high-minded one's reasons for attending the performance. In studying, imagining, and re-producing medieval drama, even if only in writing, students have to work to set aside all their assumptions about playing spaces and the relationship between audience and performers. The process thus becomes an act of critical thinking and re-evaluation of what one knows.

With all of that in mind, here are the details of the paper assignment I have given to students in my medieval drama classes at both the University of Toledo and at UCLA. As mentioned, students are asked to imagine producing and directing a performance of medieval drama—chosen from one of the texts on the syllabus—for a 21st century audience. They are given the choice of a "historically accurate" performance or a creatively modernized one. When I go over the assignment, I talk about why "historically accurate" is in scare quotes, and by the time they've reached the point where I give this assignment, they have a basic understanding of just how few are the records and details of medieval dramatic performance, and how much of our knowledge is based on reconstruction and inference. I give them two options because some students absolutely hate "creative" assignments and are better at the research-oriented work; as I say on the assignment, I allow them to play to their strengths. Aside from the usual assignment information—due date, format, goals and objectives, manner of assessment, etc.—I assign a deadline for turning in a brief announcement of their choice, and I include a long section on how to go about choosing a play and planning,

researching, and writing the project. This is also the section where I underscore issues of audience for the proposed production and for the document they are writing, as well as what their papers should cover and how to keep them from being too massive.

Regarding audience for the production, I advise students:

Think about your production's audience—who are they? Is this a familiar story or mode for them? Would they respond well to a modernization or would they prefer a historical approach? How is your chosen play appropriate for this audience? What are they going to get out of it?

I tell them to think about all the elements that a real production would entail—manner of staging and the performance space; scenery and props; costumes; music and "special effects" (whether medieval or modern); and all the elements of actors' performances (speech, movement, blocking, gesture, expression, interpretation, etc.)—but I suggest that they select effective excerpts of the play they have chosen to illustrate their vision. Although their inspiration might come from contextual art and documents presented in the secondary works that I put on reserve for them or give them links to, I emphasize in my guidelines that their interpretations should be firmly rooted in a close-reading of the text. Finally, I make sure that they understand that while they are modernizing the performance, they are not rewriting or retelling the text, and that for our purposes they need not provide a translation of the Middle English.

In giving such a detailed assignment, I try to walk a line between micro-managing and leaving them utterly to their own devices. I also try to give a sense of *why* I give them this assignment and what I hope they will learn from it — presented in a section outlining goals and intended outcomes — and show how it builds on what they've learned from the class without making them into parrots of me. Indeed, avoiding regurgitation and encouraging original thought is one of my underlying purposes in this assignment. Although we spend time in class staging bits of the plays and talking about space, casting, costuming (based on visual arts), etc., the paper topic goes a long way in making students do their own thinking instead of rehashing class discussion. I might also add that it pretty effectively prevents plagiarism, which is a great virtue of any assignment these days. And though my guidelines are detailed and clear, I still spend a good part of a class going over the assignment, especially since it is so unorthodox.

Finally, in asking students to imagine themselves making this proposal to an arts foundation, I try to make the assignment more than a classroom-bound exercise. This is not a large part of the assignment, but it gives the writing shape and purpose, and also asks them to imagine someone who might not know medieval drama — someone who may, in fact, need to be convinced of its continued relevance. This is my somewhat covert attempt to get the students to convince *themselves* of its relevance as living theater (and thus they are again "writing to learn"). Moreover, writing a proposal that imagines

an actual performance, and that asks for that performance to be funded by a grant, brings the students' study of medieval drama into economic, political, and social contexts analogous to the civic or parish or other community contexts of much of medieval drama itself. It reminds them that art is never wholly free of economics and even commerce.

I have given this particular assignment only twice, to a total of about 40 students, so my "data" in terms of its success is limited. What is more, both classes had a self-selecting pool of students who were interested in the Middle Ages or early drama, or who had taken other classes with me. Each class was an elective, and in UT's case it was a first-time special topics course, which means it was overlooked by the requirement-minded, time-strapped UT students, so the enrollment was small. That said, I do think the assignment was a success in terms of what the students learned, the quality of work it drew from them, and also, last but certainly not least, the enjoyment I got out of reading the results. Rare is the paper that is actually fun to read, and this assignment produced nothing but enjoyable projects.

But before I extol the virtues of the best papers, I should admit that not every paper was an unqualified success. Like any such assignment that is harder than it looks, there were a couple of serviceable but bland papers, particularly medieval plays given Hollywood blockbuster treatment: all special effects and spectacle (which has its place, of course) but with no real thought about meaning or aesthetic effect. And there was

one paper that misunderstood the assignment; instead of picking a single York pageant, the student spent half the paper explaining her own imagined re-writing of the plays in a seemingly random selection of episodes with the addition of Old Testament narratives not staged in any of the cycles. Yet even in these less-than-successful papers there was something to praise or signs that they understood the point on some level. One Hollywood blockbuster version of York's "Moses and Pharaoh" play, though largely a rehash of DeMille's 1956 *Ten Commandments*, did at least discuss how significant the Moses and Pharaoh play would be to L.A. and Hollywood, especially if staged outside of the Egyptian Theater on Hollywood Boulevard (the lesser known cousin to the famous Chinese Theater). At the very least, the assignment got this student thinking about audience, performance context, and intertextuality, if not very deeply.

But even in the less than wholly successful papers, the quality of writing was solid. In fact, in all the papers, the writing was consistently good to excellent, and almost always lively in voice. I think assignments such as this surreptitiously encourage clear writing by freeing students from misguided ideas of what an academic essay "should" sound like. Although process writing and description like these papers require also have their pitfalls, the papers were mercifully free of purple prose, tortuous run-on sentences, dangling modifiers, and unanchored subordinate clauses. Students wrote naturally, in their own voices, and their papers were a pleasure to read. Although student writing sometimes suffers when students tackle unfamiliar subject matter or

ideas, the imagined "occasion" for writing—to a grant board that might not know much about medieval drama—allowed students to be the experts and to fully own their projects and imagined productions, thus giving them confidence in their writing.

The difference between the most successful papers and the least was the complexity of thought the student brought to the assignment. Many of the best papers set their plays on their own campus, making the campus signify the way that York's streets did or the "mappa mundi" staging of *The Castle of Perseverance* did. One student designed the Mercers' "Last Judgment" as the capstone to an imagined whole-cycle production on UCLA's campus in which he redesignated guilds as campus groups. He renamed the Mercers the "Administrators" and set the final station outside UCLA's signature building, Royce Hall. Another set *The Castle of Perseverance* in the middle of the on-campus track and soccer stadium, drawing on both the play and game elements of medieval drama and also the importance of sports to the university community.<sup>[6]</sup> She then dressed the Virtues with costumes and props representing various aspects of the virtuous (and specifically Christian) female college student and made the devils and vices into emblems of the temptations and pitfalls of college life: drinking, drugs, sex, the group-think of fraternity life, etc. She imagined the entire production as the responsibility of campus Christian groups. A Toledo student, meanwhile, proposed a production of *Everyman* to be performed in a common but intimate area of the Student Union, which she argued would draw the audience into the performance. Moreover,

she said, "A performance in a space that the audience already knows well also lets viewers experience a familiar space being exploited in an unfamiliar way, which would make them think critically about the space and their own lives as they function in it." Although not every student expressed it so clearly, many of them aimed for such effects with their imagined productions.

Not every student set their play on their own campus, however. Some moved into the broader community, whether their city as a whole, or some subset of it. One Toledo student, who was actually from nearby Detroit, conceived of her version of the York cycle being staged on the streets of downtown Detroit—she even included a MapQuest map with the route drawn on it and stations at landmarks labeled—and she imagined the producers and players as local black churches, thus translating the medieval, traditional Christian idiom into an African-American Protestant idiom with which she was familiar, and which evoked community in an analogous way.<sup>[7]</sup> Other students decided to explore medieval drama through other historical periods, some more successfully than others. This was particularly true of the avid Shakespeare fans, who were used to seeing Shakespeare productions set in various eras as a way of reinvigorating familiar texts. The best of these was a production of *Mankind* set in the Old West. I was skeptical at first, but the paper convinced me. The student justified the setting by arguing that "To a modern viewer, the idea of the Old West offers a sense of adventure and a past far-removed enough to be exotic and enticing, but not so remote

as to evoke no response." But more convincing were the details of the setting and how the Old West made sense of some typically medieval details. The student argued in particular that Mankind's status as an agrarian worker made sense in an American West context, and was significant to the meaning of the medieval original, and thus should be retained. Furthermore, she wrote, "Since tapsters and barmaids are referenced in the medieval text, these terms (or equivalents) could be retained as well. Also, the medieval-style staging could be referenced if the setting of a bar or a saloon, or some old western equivalent of an English inn were incorporated in some manner." She went on to argue, among other things, that raucous gun play could mark Mischief and his cronies, that the stereotypically swinging doors of the saloon could be used for comic entrances and exits, and that the disturbing and significant use of nooses and gallows at key moments in the play would make even more sense to an American audience in an Old West setting.

Many of the strongest papers also presented sensitive thinking about what it means to do a medieval Christian play in contemporary America, whether one sees that American world largely from a secular or a religious perspective. One UCLA student presented herself as a "liberal atheist feminist university student" who nevertheless saw the ethical value in the "affective" goals of the York "Death of Christ" play and also the problems in attaining that goal today. She wrote:

I want my audience to experience all the same emotions a medieval audience would have. I want them to feel terror, awe, pity, and guilt. Obviously, a historically accurate reproduction would not produce this effect. While such a production might evoke some of these feelings, the effect would be undermined by a transference of the emotions to the medieval audience for whom my audience is standing in....I don't wish to show how a medieval audience would have been made to feel indicted, for example. I wish to indict. The key to achieving this is to force the audience to view the familiar iconographic images with new eyes. The traditional icons are so well-established in our collective awareness that they have long since lost their emotional impact. To restore the emotional impact, the images must be made fresh....Throughout the production, I will be setting up and then undermining familiar images, forcing the audience to react to the familiar, and then to react again when what they think they know is challenged. This paper was written before Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* came out, but in the class at Toledo, we watched the movie together at the end of the course, not long after its release in theaters and on video. Students of various religious and non-religious backgrounds vocally compared Gibson's movie unfavorably with the York plays; as a result their papers were filled with phrases like "unlike the unfortunate choices Gibson and his screenwriter made..." or else they stated their intent to steer clear from passion narratives entirely for fear of being associated with Gibson's movie in their imagined productions. Students often, in fact, hypothesized a wide public reaction, or at least

campus reaction, to their proposed plays. Again, the extent to which they imagined their plays taking place in communities and having real impact on their audiences was gratifying.

My assignment, then, successfully encouraged students to think about all those aspects of early drama that are not readily apparent on the page; in other words, my topic was another way of teaching drama. Moreover, as the second half of my title states, the topic was a way of teaching drama throughwriting. In having students write about an imagined production, rather than putting one on, I released them from the limits of time, space and material resources so that they could explain and describe what they might not have been able to enact. They also had to justify their choices in analytic and interpretative terms, thus making them selectively pick what they did or did not describe in detail – a process related to choosing evidence in a more traditional essay assignment. In other words, as I continually stressed to students, the assignment was not an anything goes creative self-expression—it was still rooted in the core skills of close reading and analysis that we hope to teach in every English class.

An assignment like this is, I think, ideally suited to medieval drama, as so much of its meaning was produced in its interaction with the performing communities and their audience, who were often one and the same. This assignment of creating new contexts for the plays helps students see the plays as living events, not dead artifacts. And it puts into concrete practice such critical notions as interpretative communities

and performance as interpretative act – aspects of interpretation they can take with them into other classes. Finally, I think the assignment stretches students beyond the usual dichotomy of what the text meant "then" vs. what it means "now," by making them see that "what the text meant then" is still very much a product of what it means now, and that any kind of pure medieval understanding of the plays is inaccessible as such. For many of the students, this assignment turns on light bulbs: they discover that modern passion plays and Gibson's movie are similar to medieval plays, but not the same, in part because of historical and social contexts; they learn that the past is always an interpretative (re)construction, and that history is a process not an artifact. In other words, the assignment also teaches history and historical interpretation through writing about drama. Perhaps it is not really the best assignment ever, nor am I the first to come up with it, but it is an effective one in a wide variety of ways, and I encourage others to try it.

Author's Note: This is the assignment largely as I gave it in 2004 at The University of Toledo, but I have updated the bibliography slightly to make it more useful for the present day.

## Assignment Topic and Instructions

### The Topic – The Basic Idea (Details Below):

- In a 5-8 page paper, you will write about the *performance* of early English drama, based on a close reading of a selected play.
- Imagine you are producing and directing a performance of one of the plays we've read in this class, but need to apply for funding from an arts agency, and thus have to write a proposal describing and justifying your production.
- Your production may take one of the following forms:
- either a "historically accurate" reconstruction (as far as that is possible) of 15th and 16th century productions (albeit for a modern audience) – including the use of historical staging contexts;
- OR a totally modernized production for modern contexts – what you choose to keep from the early methods is up to you, though it should be in the *spirit* of the original.
- The first choice is a little more research-oriented, the second more creative, which allows you to play to your strengths.
- You may choose any play we've studied this quarter (for the purposes of the York Cycle, "play" means individual pageant, e.g. "The Crucifixion" play).
- Whatever play and whatever method you choose, you'll have to explain in your paper your reasons for making those choices – see below for more details and ideas. Keep in mind that your imagined reader is the funding body of an arts organization. In other words, imagine that you really are going to produce this play with their financial help!

### The Technical Stuff:

- Due Dates:
- Initial brief proposal (a short paragraph), stating the play you have chosen and the style of performance you intend (historical or modernized — you don't have to have the details worked out): Tuesday, November 8, in class, at the beginning of class
- Completed paper: Tuesday, December 7, in class, at the beginning of class
- Late papers will be penalized 1/3 of a grade for every 24-hour cycle they are late, beginning at 4:45 p.m., December 7
- Length & Format: 5-8 pages, double-spaced, 1-inch margins (like the ones here), a font comparable to this one.

- This means at least five *full* pages, not four and a half. Frankly, to do a thorough job and make a convincing argument, you'll probably need more than five pages (and *definitely* more than five paragraphs – forget that old high school model!), unless you have mastered a pithy and concise style of writing that allows you to say multiple things at once with a single well-turned phrase. You're a smart bunch, but somehow I doubt you've mastered that skill yet.
- Also, be sure to give your paper an informative title.
- Plagiarism: DON'T DO IT. Your professors are a canny bunch and we have been known to catch and punish plagiarists. Penalties for plagiarism at UT can range from an F in the class and/or suspension or expulsion from school. I take intellectual property rights and the infringement of them very seriously. SEE SYLLABUS.

### **The Details (Important Stuff to Think About When Planning and Writing):**

- A bibliography of books, articles, videos and web sites to help you is attached; all of the books and videos listed are on reserve in the Library under my name, and the individual articles are on E-reserve there, which means you don't have to leave home to read them
- Follow your bliss – pick the play that most interests you or that you think would be most dramatically interesting
- If you've picked a really long play (e.g., the Digby *Mary Magdalene*), narrow down your discussion to an important section (or sections) of approximately 500 lines
- Think about your production's audience – who are they? Is this a familiar story or mode for them? Would they respond well to a modernization (if that's what you're doing) or would they prefer the historical approach? How is your chosen play appropriate for this audience? What are they going to get out of it?
- Be sure to define who your audience is in your paper – give a *little* background if you think your reader (i.e., that imagined funding agency, but also me) will need it.
- For example, let's say you decide to produce a modernized version of *Mankind* for a UAW audience. (I have no idea if that's a logical choice – this is an arbitrary example.) What would they respond immediately and positively to in the play? What might require some explanation for them? Overall, would they *relate* to it? Why?

- Modernization, by the way, means modern dress, style of acting, special effects, and so forth – you don't have to "translate" the text for the purposes of your paper (though one imagines you would if you were *really* putting on a production). In the end it will still be early drama in modern guise – you can't really escape that.
- Think about all the elements that a real production would entail: staging contexts, scenery, props, music, costume, "special effects" (whether medieval or modern), casting, and all the things involving your actors' performances: speech, movement, blocking, gesture, expression
- Even in the shorter plays, you might want to concentrate on carefully selected excerpts to discuss what the actors do – otherwise your paper will go on forever!
- ALWAYS ask yourself *why* you've made these choices and discuss the representative or most important reasons why in your paper (if it's a historical reconstruction, cite your sources for your choices).
- The question I always get asked when I give a funky assignment: "How on earth do I organize this paper?!" Here are my suggestions (though if you come up with something that works better for you, go with it):
- Divide it into sections with headings like "Introduction and Background," "Staging Contexts," "Scenery," "Costumes and Props," etc.
- It won't have a thesis-support-conclusion structure, but it will nevertheless be **based on a close reading of the play** throughout and will thus be implicitly analytical.
- Write at least a brief conclusion about the overall effect you are going for (is your production for spiritual enlightenment? Intellectual curiosity? Entertainment? Or something else?) to give the paper a sense of closure and purpose.
- Unfortunately, most of life comes without *any* instructions (gasp!), and sometimes you don't know how something's going to turn out, or how to do it, until you actually sit down and *do it*. In other words:
- I'm willing to help you all you want, in office hours or by appointment, but first you have to do a little work (at least reread your play of choice and think about how it should look and sound) or else we won't get anywhere
- That said, I'm going to end these instructions here, and if you have any questions that come up in the process of working on this, get in touch and we'll figure out the answers

## **Bibliography Resources You Already Have:**

Marshall, John, "Modern Productions of Medieval English Plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 1996) 290-311.

See also the Bibliography in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 344-364, arranged by subject.

[Note: Since I last assigned this project, a second edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* has been published (2008), co-edited by Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher. In that edition, the article on "Modern Productions of Medieval English Plays" (287-325) was written by John McKinnell.]

## **Web Sites:**

Poculi Ludique Societas (includes pictures of their performances and *many* links to other drama sites): <http://groups.chass.utoronto.ca/plspls/>

Sydney Higgins' Medieval Drama Links (tons of links with sections on such elements as "Costume," etc.): <http://www.collectorspost.com/Catalogue/medramalinks.htm>

For medieval art: <http://www.getty.edu/art/> (Select Subject:Religion, then select subtopic of interest, e.g. Christ, Demons, Mary, etc. Pictures from northern Europe – England, France, Netherlands, Scandinavia and Germany – from ca. 1200-1500 are most pertinent if you are doing a 'historical' production.)

For pictures of 1998 Toronto production of York cycle:  
<http://english.cua.edu/toronto/york98.cfm>

Additional sites I would add to update this list:

The Flickr site with pictures of our 2010 production of "Creation/Doomsday: Selections from the Chester Mystery Cycle" at the University of Toledo:  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/7669440@N07/sets/72157624101595077/>

Photos of the 2012 production of the Chester Cycle in Toronto, CA, taken and uploaded by "birdkabob":

<http://s186.photobucket.com/albums/x52/birdkabob/Toronto%20Chester%202010/>

The web site of past productions of the Chester Mystery Cycle in Chester, England:

[http://www.chestermysteryplays.com/past\\_productions/past\\_productions.html](http://www.chestermysteryplays.com/past_productions/past_productions.html)

The web site of the 2012 modern-dress, fixed-stage production of The York Mystery Plays in York, England (dir. Paul Burbridge and Damian Cruden):

<http://www.yorkmysteryplays-2012.com/>, as well as the web site where one can view videos of the entire production: <http://thespace.org/items/e0000pr6>

The web site of the 2010 guild-produced, pageant-wagon production of The York Mystery Plays: <http://www.yorkmysteryplays.co.uk/index.htm> (which includes a link to a YouTube video)

Various videos on YouTube

### **Articles on Electronic Reserve (with hard copies also on reserve):**

Carpenter, Sarah. "Towneley Plays at Wakefield." *Medieval English Theatre* 2 (1980): 49-52.

Coletti, Theresa M. and Kathleen M. Ashley. "The N-Town Passion at Toronto and Late Medieval Passion Iconography." *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 24 (1981): 181-92.

Happé, Peter. "Acting the York Mystery Plays: A Consideration of Modes." *Medieval English Theatre* 10 (1988): 112-16.

McKinnell, John. "Staging the Digby *Mary Magdalene*." *Medieval English Theatre* 6 (1984): 126-52.

-----, "Producing the York Mary Plays." *Medieval English Theatre* 12 (1990): 101-23.

Nichols, Ann. "Costume in the Moralities: The Evidence of East Anglian Art." *Comparative Drama* 20 (1986-7): 305-14.

Sheingorn, Pamela. "On Using Medieval Art in the Study of Medieval Drama: An Introduction to Methodology." *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 22 (1979): 101-9.

Twycross, Meg, "Beyond the Picture Theory: Image and Activity in Medieval Drama." *Word and Image* 4 (1988): 589-617.

**Books on Reserve (2 hour loans, plus overnight within 2 hours of closing):**

Anderson, Mary Desiree. *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963.

Davidson, Clifford. *Visualizing the Moral Life: Medieval Iconography and the Macro Morality Plays*. New York: AMS Press, 1989.

-----, ed. *Material Culture and Medieval Drama*. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999.

-----, and Thomas H. Seiler, eds. *The Iconography of Hell*. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992.

Elliott, John R. *Playing God: Medieval Mysteries on the Modern Stage*. Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 1989.

In future versions of the project, I would add the following three books:

Normington, Katie. *Modern Mysteries: Contemporary Productions of Medieval English Cycle Dramas*. Woodbridge, UK, and Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2007.

Rogerson, Margaret. *Playing a Part in History: The York Mysteries, 1951-2006*. Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

— —, ed. *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City*. Woodbridge, UK, and Rochester, NY: York Medieval Press; Boydell and Brewer, 2011.

### Other Media:

*The York Mystery Plays*, 1998. Video. On Reserve for 2-hour or overnight check-out. Use library VCRs (in Multimedia department) or take home to view. (Note: in the future I might look into getting this VHS tape converted to digital form.)

### Endnotes

[1] For an overview of problem-based learning, see the web page of the Problem-Based Learning Faculty Institute at the University of California, Irvine:  
<http://www.pbl.uci.edu/whatispbl.html>.

[2] For a general overview of "writing to learn" and other WAC practices, visit the immensely useful WAC Clearinghouse web site: <http://wac.colostate.edu/>.

[3] Although I use Richard Beadle and Pamela King's modernized edition of the York plays, many of the other plays I have assigned, from John C. Coldewey's *Early English Drama* anthology, are presented in original spelling. In the future, I will almost certainly use the modernized spelling anthology of medieval drama that I have co-edited with John Sebastian for Broadview Press.

[4] It occurs to me now that one exception here might be first-person-shooter video games, which do call for a player to imagine him or herself as part of the scenario. But I admit that I have limited experience with such games—unless Beatles Rock Band counts—and have not yet invoked them in my courses.

[5] See image at <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/illmanus/other/largeimage77659.html>.

[6] The football team plays at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena and thus, she argued, would not do as it didn't signify the campus community as clearly. I wish she had thought through some of the implications of that distance, but her project was nevertheless thoughtful in general.

[7] Some would argue that students who gave the plays Protestant settings and meanings missed an important aspect of medieval drama, and I would agree with them to a certain extent, without fully disallowing such re-imaginings. The most successful papers that made such transformations were self-conscious about the potential clash of theologies and discussed their projects as translations or adaptations.

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2. "Bedford Hours, Exit from Ark." *Online Gallery*. British Library. n.d. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.
3. Britton, James. "Writing to learn and learning to write." *The Humanity of English: NCTE distinguished lectures, 1972*. Ed. NCTE. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. 32-53. Print.
4. Coldewey, John C., ed. *Early English Drama*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities.
5. DeMille, Cecil B., dir. *The Ten Commandments*. Paramount Pictures, 1956. Film.
6. Fitzgerald, Christina M., and John T. Sebastian, eds. *The Broadview Anthology of Medieval Drama*. Peterborough, Ontario, and Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2012. Print.
7. Gallow, De. "What is Problem-Based Learning?" *Problem-Based Learning Faculty Institute*. University of California, Irvine. n.d. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.
8. Gibson, Mel, dir. *The Passion of the Christ*. Newmarket Films, 2004. Film.

9. Kiefer, Kate, et al. "Five Principles." *WAC Clearinghouse*. Colorado State University. 1997-2012. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.
10. ---. "What is Writing to Learn?" *WAC Clearinghouse*. Colorado State University. 1997-2012. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.
11. Stevenson, Jill. *Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture: Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.