CHAPTER 6

CORPUS CHRISTI DRAMA AND THE PLACES OF MEMORY: LITURGICAL PRECEDENTS AND ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPT ANALOGUES

In this chapter, we shall step back from discursive treatments of images and their proper function to look at two manifestations of imagemaking—one a precedent for and the other an analogue to the Corpus Christi drama. From its earliest forms in the Mass, the liturgy was regarded as a memorial to Christ’s life, and the tropes and ceremonies to which it gave rise contain clear evidence of attention to matters of context and place. At the same time, the developing visual art of manuscript illumination, particularly the illumination of Books of Hours largely contemporary with the Corpus Christi plays, reveals a sensitivity on several levels to space, border, and background, which suggests parallels to the drama.

As we have seen, Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle’s *De Anima*, establishes in Part I of the *Summa Theologiae*, Questions 75–89, the cognitive matrix of the drama as understood by Reginald Pecock and later writers on images and drama. His model establishes the primary importance of sensibilia, especially visual sensibilia, and locates the memory in the sensitive part of the soul. The memorative power [vis memorativa] exists for the preservation of the “thesaurus...formarum” derived from sensibilia. As Frances Yates has noted, “it is difficult to suppose that such inner images might not have found their way into outer expression.”¹ The English Corpus Christi drama, like the earlier liturgical drama as well as the illuminations of Books of Hours and other manuscripts, functioned as just such a set of external memory images—a “mynding signe” (Pecock’s term) uniquely suited to jog the minds of viewers toward spiritual understanding.

Precedent: The Liturgical Drama

We might begin by observing that the proliferation and ambiguity of terms designating *place* in play texts have long concerned scholars of medieval drama, particularly those interested in establishing conventions of “staging.” If the images of drama are indeed “mynding signes,” as Pecock says, then background or location is integral to their identity. O. B. Hardison, for example, cites the three different designations of place in the twelfth-century *La Seinte Resureccion* “called variously *lius, mansions, and estals,*” noting that,

> How the *mansions* and *estals* were constructed is unknown. On the basis of the *Mystere* and complex Latin plays it seems possible that they were platforms, but even this is conjecture.¹

David Bevington, while clearly postulating an arena theater arrangement for the *N-Town Passion Play*, nonetheless brackets the relative unfamiliarity and ambiguity of the term *place* in the play’s text by framing it (sometimes along with other similar terms potentially designating scaffolding or space) in quotation marks, for example,

> In *Passion Play I*, for instance, the Jewish Council house or “oratory,” located in the middle of the “place,” is equipped with curtains whereby the Jews can be concealed.…. The central “place” is an ideal location for meetings and for noisy, bustling crowd scenes...³

Indeed, Alan Nelson, in his article on staging configurations, identifies no fewer than nine terms, ranging from the Latin *domus* to the English *place*, variously designating location or place in medieval play texts.⁴ Since the English term *place* is ambiguous, Nelson prefers the terms *locus* and *platea* to designate, respectively, localized and unlocalized areas where performance may occur.⁵ Several of Nelson’s terms, including *sedes* and the ubiquitous *locus*, echo the terms for place and background in the classical memory texts we have examined. Without claiming to solve the various conundrums of performance configuration, we can nonetheless observe that the very proliferation itself of terms designating place in dramatic texts can be taken as evidence of their provenance from memory theory, and that on many occasions such terms, particularly the frequently used *locus* and its variants, may be appearing merely as the technical terms of mnenotechnic.

Certainly the earlier liturgical and church drama was always intimately tied to place, and that tie is often articulated in the Latin texts of the plays in terms familiar from the discourse established in both rhetorical writings on memory and Aquinas’ work. O. B. Hardison, in his analysis of