

Two Minor Dramatic Experiments. Edward Morgan Forster and His Pageants

Krzysztof Fordoński
Lingwistyczna Szkoła Wyższa, Warsaw

ABSTRACT

The article concentrates on two short and little known dramatic texts (pageants) written by E. M. Forster in the late 1930s entitled *The Abinger Pageant* and *England's Pleasant Land*. The introductory part introduces the history of pageant in the early 20th century. The article presents briefly Forster's earlier, mostly unsuccessful, dramatic experiments, analyses the two texts, their staging and the publishing history of the two playlets, as well as their place in Forster's further development as an artist as well as their place in Forsterian criticism. Certain consideration is also given to their musical setting as well as the author's cooperation with the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams.

KEY WORDS: Forster, pageant, dramatic, Williams

ABSTRAKT

Artykuł omawia dwie niewielkie teksty dramatyczne (tzw. pageant) napisane przez E. M. Forstera w drugiej połowie lat 30. XX wieku *The Abinger Pageant* oraz *England's Pleasant Land*. W części wprowadzającej omówiona także została historia pageant (historycznego widowiska plenerowego typowego dla krajów anglosaskich) na początku XX wieku. Artykuł omawia dalej zwięźle wcześniejsze, w większości niezbyt udane, eksperymenty dramatyczne pisarza, zawiera analizę obu tekstów, omawia historię wystawień oraz publikacji obu tekstów, a także ich wpływ na dalszy rozwój twórczości Forstera,

oraz ich miejsce w opracowaniach krytycznych. Omówiona została także współpraca pisarza z autorem muzyki do obu spektakli Ralphem Vaughnem Williamsem.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Forster, pageant, dramatyczny, Williams

Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) is one of the most eminent English writers of the 20th century. His permanent place in the history of literature was ensured by his last novel *A Passage to India* (1924) but also by his earlier works, such as *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), and *Maurice* (1912/1970). Opera lovers remember Forster as the co-author (with Eric Crozier) of the libretto for the opera *Billy Budd* by Benjamin Britten, based on a short story by Herman Melville.

Forster's oeuvre is not limited to fiction. Before and during the Second World War he gained remarkable popularity due to his essays and radio broadcasts in which he always defended liberal and humanistic values. His essays were published in two volumes entitled *Abinger Harvest* (1936) and *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951). Forster wrote also numerous essays dealing with the history and culture of the Mediterranean (e.g. those collected in the volume *Pharos and Pharillon*, 1923) and India (*The Hill of Devi*, 1953). He left also a sizeable body of literary criticism of which the best known is *Aspects of the Novel* (1927).

Forster attempted to write for the stage several times in the early days of his career. However, none of these early attempts was successful, few were ever completed, and none staged. In 1907 he wrote an "extravaganza" (in this case meaning a one act play) *The Deceased Wife's Husband*, a playful comment on a recent change in legislation (Furbank 1, 158) which, however minor, influenced the history of his family. In 1909 he started a historical play about St Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373) entitled simply *St Bridget*. Only the first act was ever completed (Furbank 178) which was also the case for quite a few other works from the period (e.g. the unfinished novel *Arctic Summer*) which the writer began while trying to fight off writer's block.

Two years later he completed a contemporary play *The Heart of Bosnia* but he never attempted to get it staged or published (Furbank 199-201). A summary of the play provided by Philip N. Furbank is decidedly off-putting. It is a melodramatic and bloody tale of unrequited love and Balkan revenge combined with a story of perfect male friendship destroyed by a whim of a foolish girl. Forster's posthumous papers include a few other dramatic fragments of equally limited value.

It was only in 1934 that Forster agreed to write for the stage in earnest at the request of his friends. This time, however, he opted for a more low-key, fairly fashionable dramatic genre – the pageant. His play was intended for an amateur troupe from Abinger, a small town in Sussex where Forster had lived with his mother for over a quarter of a century. Profits from the performances were intended to support renovation of the local parish church of St James dating from the 11th century.

In its original meaning of the term pageant was a form typical for English medieval drama, close to mystery cycles. The very term originally defined rather the form of performance than the type of drama. A pageant usually consisted of a number of short scenes performed by actors who in a sort of a procession approached the audience in sequence. In a later version the scenes were performed on platforms which were brought to the main town square (or in front of the church) and after the performance they were removed to make room for the next.

The name derived from Latin ‘pagina’ originally meant specifically such a moveable stage made of a platform. It was only later used to denote the plays presented on such a platform. Cuddon provides the following brief description: “the platform ... was built on wheels and consisted of two rooms: the lower was used as a dressing room, the upper as a stage” (475). However, due to the scarcity of available materials it is impossible to say whether the platforms did in fact always take such an elaborate form.

The cycles were most often presented as a part of Corpus Christi celebrations in the late spring. Most often they depicted the history of the world understood as the history of salvation from the Creation to the Last Judgment told according to the biblical tradition. The literary content was usually minimal often bordering on non-existent. The whole text could consist only of short quotations from the Bible. The performance was expected to impress the audience with beautiful outfits of the actors, rich decorations and props, as well as music.

Pageants disappeared in the 1530s as a result of the Reformation along with all other forms of English religious drama. They were revived four centuries later by Louis Napoleon Parker, “a playwright, part-time composer, and all-around impresario, who launched the boom with his 1905 *Sherbourne Pageant*” (Withington 2, 193) and over the following decades they spread across Great Britain.¹

¹ They found enthusiastic following also on the other side of the Atlantic, see: David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990.

The Parkerian pageant-plays were generally staged over several days in open fields, near monuments, and ruins, with large casts of amateur actors and squads of local writers, composers, musicians, builders, painters, and seamstresses. In structure, the pageants resembled chronicle plays, but the hero of the piece was a provincial town instead of a celebrated saint. Each pageant presented a series of historical episodes linked by prologues and epilogues, narrative and dramatic choruses, musical interludes and long parades. Despite – or probably more accurately, because of – the pageant-play’s particular combination of rote patriotism, recycled literary materials, and often clumsy theatrical amateurism, these productions became widely popular in Britain (Esty 248).

The choice of this particular dramatic form is easily comprehensible, as this “neotraditional genre, the pageant-play referred almost inevitably to rural and antiquarian ideals of Englishness [and it] was refitted to serve as the genre of insular and interclass harmony (Esty 246). This was precisely what Forster intended to achieve through his pageants – an idealized vision of interclass harmony in a perfect rural setting in which the former was seen as a necessary condition of the preservation of the latter.

The Abinger Pageant, “a celebration of the Surrey village in which Forster lived most of his life” (Summers 317) quite obviously follows rather the Parkerian than the medieval pattern in its elaborate theatrical form. Nevertheless, the text retains certain similarities with the medieval tradition. Although the actual performance was quite long, the whole text consists of a mere thirteen pages (Forster 337-349) only a minute part of which is spoken by characters (mainly the Woodman and often off stage) who consequently lack any chance of developing any individual traits. Another part is a collection of traditional songs, and a major part of the text consists of detailed stage directions and descriptions. This structure resulted in a play “lacking in linguistic complexity and figurative depth [which] represents an ideal of village craft rather than professional art” (Esty 257).

The play consists of six episodes which reflect the more important moments from the history of the parish which are largely represented in the form of *tableaux vivants*. The first episode presents Britons, Romans, Saxons, and Normans, ending in the Domesday Survey. The first scene of the second episode takes place during the reign of King John the Lackland. The second scene takes place in 1220 and features twelve pilgrims from Canterbury who have “deviated from the Pilgrims’ Way which runs across the north of the parish” (Forster 340). The pilgrims are “types shown by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*” which is an obvious anachronism as the *Tales* were written a hundred and fifty years later. They sing “Angelus ad Virginem”. This part seems put together from all the most basic clichés of Merrie England.

The third episode entitled “The Hammer Forge” takes the audience back to 1588, the year of the Great Armada, although the subject matter is rather the local iron production flourishing during the Elizabethan age. The fourth episode celebrates the local Evelyn family, the owners of Abinger and Paddington, and the most famous of them John Evelyn (1620-1706) the diarist and writer, author of the treatise *Sylva or a Discourse of Forest Trees* (1664). In the book Evelyn induced people who were to replant the woods which had been destroyed owing to the iron works (Forster 344). This episode also reflects the events of the War of Three Kingdoms, the Commonwealth, and the following Restoration of the Stuart monarchy.

The fifth episode “Smugglers and Other Gentry” which recalls events of the 1760s is divided into two parts: the first recalls the smuggling of alcohol from the continent, while the second a visit paid by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his mistress Therese Levasseur watching some Morris and country dances. The final episode reflects on the events of the 19th century and the pageant ends with the Epilogue spoken by the Woodman after whose departure “the arena is again occupied by the flock of sheep” (Forster 349).

An important element of both the medieval and the 20th century pageant was music and in this respect *The Abinger Pageant* also sticks to the tradition. The score includes several religious songs, psalms, and hymns, as well as folk songs and dances either composed or adapted by Ralph Vaughan Williams (Kennedy 241). For Vaughan Williams the undertaking was of negligible importance, his participation, however, greatly helped in its success. His biographer Michael Kennedy remarked that although similar performances were often sneered at by the more sophisticated audience it rather seldom happened that the text was written by E. M. Forster and the score composed by Vaughan Williams (241).

Ursula Vaughan Williams claims that the composer arranged and composed several pieces including a “melody he loved (and which he later used in *First Nowell*) ‘Angelus ad Virginem’ and his own composition ‘O how amiable’ which he later published and dedicated to Fanny Farrer” (202). The music was performed by the Band of the 2nd Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment (Prince of Wales’ Own). The composer was very much involved in the preparations for the performance as well as during the rehearsals of the orchestra and intended to conduct it. Yet an accident he had early that summer forced him to hand over the baton to the director and composer David Moule-Evans.

The whole show was produced by Tom Harrison who had been the originator of the idea (Forster 442). The pageant was performed largely by local forces, mostly children,

but also included a sizeable host of local animals such as cows,² horses, sheep, and “positively the smallest pony in Britain” (*The Times*’ anonymous “Special Correspondent” as quoted in Forster 442-443). It was performed twice on 14 and 18 July 1934.

The Abinger Pageant is only a little more than “an episodic celebration of English rural life and a protest against the destruction of the greenwood” (Summers 327) in which Forster adroitly adapted the pattern inherited from Parker to specific local circumstances. It shows Forster’s love for the local community in which he was to live until 1945, his interest in the local or as he would probably call it domestic history, and protection of nature, all issues which had played an important role in his writings previously. Nevertheless, it is of a rather moderate literary merit. Consequently, although it was very well received³ it has never been revived. It was, however, included as an addition in the first volume of Forster’s essays *Abinger Harvest* published in 1936.

Three years after the performance of *The Abinger Pageant*, in the autumn of 1937, the writer and the composer got together once more in a similar undertaking. The title, *England’s Pleasant Land*, echoes a line “England’s green and pleasant land” taken from the poem “And did those feet in ancient time” (also known as “Jerusalem”) by William Blake. The income from this pageant was to benefit the Dorking and Leith Hill District Preservation Society. The main subject was protection of the local rural landscape from being converted by developers (Vaughan Williams 216).

The form chosen by Forster differs from that of his first attempt at a pageant. It is much more theatrical and much more modern at the same time. *England’s Pleasant Land* includes twelve characters. It is typically modern, for example, in that as Forster states in an untitled introduction to the 1940 edition: “the play is not about any particular person” (neither is it about a particular place). Eleven of the characters are “types who are connected in various ways with rural England”, each such “type” is played by the same actor throughout the play. “Their costumes may alter, but their characters [do] not change” (Forster 357). An element retained from the earlier pageant is the twelfth chorus-like character, this time called the Recorder, who does not participate in the events but comments on them and introduces consecutive acts and scenes.

² A programme advertisement reads “Get your milk from the cows that are taking part in the pageant” (Forster 442).

³ „The pageant was well publicized in *The Times*. An article headed “Abinger Pageant/Local History Revised” announced its content and form on 7 July, it was reviewed as “Pageant of Trees/Village Players at Abinger” on Monday 16 July, and finally Forster himself wrote a short letter published as “Pageant of Trees” on 18 July” (note by Elizabeth Heine in: Forster 442).

The pageant consists of a Prologue which takes the audience back to 1066 A.D., the days of the Norman Conquest, and the settling of the land completed with the Domesday Book in 1086. The Prologue is followed by the First Act, entitled "The Enclosures". Its first scene, "Squire George's Difficulty – A.D. 1760" presents the owner of the village being convinced of the profits of enclosures which are put into effect in Scene II. Scene III takes place some seventy years later when the effects of the enclosures are fully felt and lead to the labourers' revolt which ends in bloodshed.

The second act is entitled "The Death Duties". Once more it is introduced by a short speech of the Recorder who introduces us to the final days of the reign of Queen Victoria. Scene I shows a garden party in A.D. 1899 which is "a celebration of Domesday" (Forster 384). The party turns into a confrontation between the labourers and the Old Squire who suddenly dies. The new Squire, Young George, plans to change the situation but his plans come to naught when he is informed that he must pay the death duties (tax on inheritance). The taxes force him to sell the property which as a result is "ripe for development" as the final song of the pageant announces (Forster 399). The pageant ends in an Epilogue spoken by the Recorder which is a plea for preservation of the country.

In its written form this pageant is much closer formally to a regular play with its abundance of dialogues. The pageant elements, however, are still present: we have a number of scenes and processions such as a procession of The Ghosts of the Past which ends Scene I of Act II or a dancing vision of the "developed" countryside called in the text the Pageant of Horrors which ends Scene II of the same act. The latter scene is also an example of scenes the appeal of which combines the visual aspect with dance and songs composed or selected by Vaughan Williams.

Vaughan Williams also took a different approach to his second pageant. As previously, a large part of the score consists of his arrangements of the works of Gustav Holst, William Cole, Mary Couper, and others. Foremost, however, Vaughan Williams used the pageant as a firing ground for his Fifth Symphony; the audience was thus treated to a preview to parts of the scherzo and the prelude. This time it was the composer himself who conducted the Band of the 2nd Bn. The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (Kennedy 257).⁴ The pageant was performed on 9, 14 and 16 July 1938 in Milton Court, county Surrey.

⁴ Elizabeth Heine in her notes to Forster (443) claims, however, that the conductor was A. Young. A probable solution to this riddle is that the pageant was performed thrice within a week; it might have been conducted by two different conductors on different dates.

Critics such as Summers see little difference between the two pageants: “like *The Abinger Pageant* *England’s Pleasant Land* celebrates rural England and pleads for conservation” (354) but this opinion is true only in a very general sense. The handling of the subject matter varies greatly. In *England’s Pleasant Land*

we find no romantic nostalgia, only a biting indignation against the Enclosures and later the Developers, the latter destroying the beauty which, ironically, the former had created. But the play no more confronts the paradox than does *Howards End*. Lamentation and anger never quite fuse in Forster’s work (Cavaliero 178).

England’s Pleasant Land marks for Forster a step towards a more general and abstract presentation of the problems which rural England faced in the early decades of the 20th century.

It is very difficult to speak about the reactions of the audience for whom the text could have been a relatively minor part of the whole pageant machinery. It is quite possible that actually it is a script “which plays better than it reads” (Forster 354) yet both Forster’s pageants

when read as literary texts, they offer a rather weak synthesis of the ideological and libidinal elements that come alive in Forster’s fiction. As participatory village rituals, though, they have the appeal of a communal and spontaneous representation of an entire, cherished way of life (Esty 257).

The final effect of *England’s Pleasant Land* is rather flat and uninspiring for two reasons. The first is the choice of “types” over individual characters. This is in line with the pageant tradition both medieval and Edwardian, and Forster makes the best of these limitations using them as a medium for comic relief e.g. in the dialogues of two female guests opening the first scenes of both acts similar and dissimilar at the same time, reflecting current attitudes to the countryside, or the speeches of Bumble who represents a different view in every scene yet he is fully convinced that he never budges and always stands on the side of the law. However, these theatrical devices stressed by the already mentioned fact that each of the “types” is played by the same actor in every scene, make it impossible to give the characters any psychological depth. The “types” moving within a very loosely depicted reality of “the English countryside” leave the reader rather indifferent to the problem they represent.

The other reason is the very issue which the pageant attempts to tackle. Throughout the play Forster quite cunningly avoids contemplating the other side of the development problem. He concentrates on the country and its inhabitants while the city is initially presented as populated by people too shallow to understand the value of the country and finally as the source of "Horrors of the Present" which invade and destroy it. There is no easy solution to the city-country conflict but from the pageant it seems that Forster's sympathy is exclusive for the countrymen and the countryside while he is oblivious to the horrors of living in an overcrowded city. In effect he submerges the conflict instead of trying to solve it, the resulting vision sadly lacks the irony with which representation of the same conflict was presented in his earlier novels such as *Howards End*.

Forster was apparently quite aware of the shortcomings of his second pageant as he never included it in any of his collections. It was published only once in 1940 by Hogarth Press as a separate pamphlet and reprinted over half a century later in the 10th volume of the Abinger Edition of the Works of E. M. Forster in 1996. Just as *The Abinger Pageant* it has never been revived.

Forster was not the only modern writer who was attracted by the pseudo-medieval form of the pageant. In 1934, the same year when *The Abinger Pageant* was staged, T. S. Eliot wrote and staged a pageant entitled *The Rock*, at the suggestion of the bishop of Chichester, George Bell, and for charitable purposes on behalf of the Forty-Five Churches Fund. For Eliot the experience proved creative enough to make the poet turn towards a completely new career of a playwright, which was to last twenty years.

For Forster the two pageants were apparently merely temporary diversions undertaken for a good cause, excursions into a new literary sphere, from which he returned little moved to his essays, reviews, and radio talks which he continued to write for another thirty years. The pageants gave him, however, valuable experience firstly of writing for a real stage and preparing his own texts for performance through rehearsals, and secondly of cooperation with the first rate composer, Vaughan Williams. The experience proved priceless when he returned to writing for the stage in the late 1940s, invited by Benjamin Britten to write the libretto for a new opera commissioned for the Festival of Britain. The result of their cooperation was *Billy Budd*, the only truly successful and lasting dramatic work of E. M. Forster.

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