Some Show Must Go On: Elizabethan York as a Case Study in the Demise of Locally Based Theatre in Tudor England

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The growing volume of local dramatic records published by the University of Toronto in its on-going *Records of Early English Drama* reveals some interesting patterns relevant to the emergence of the theatre we associate with Shakespeare. Before the religious reformations of Henry VIII and Edward VI, there were but a few "professional" acting companies sponsored by aristocrats, like Shakespeare's Chamberlain's Men. Instead, an extensive and often elaborate theatrical tradition of local religiously based drama flourished throughout England.

By the mid-fourteenth century, community-based performances of religious drama drawn from Bible stories and the lives of saints had become a part of the popular culture of many a town and city in England. The institution of the feast of Corpus Christi (1311) seems to have spurred this phenomenon. The feast of Corpus Christi falls shortly after Pentecost, usually in mid- to late-May, and in earlier times involved elaborate processions of clergy, town officials and guildsmen bearing a consecrated wafer through the streets of the community. Before long, especially in larger municipalities like Lincoln, Wakefield, York, and Coventry, plays performed by the laity based on religious themes began to become part of the celebrations. In other communities, like Chester, the feast of Whitsun (Pentecost) involved similar festivities.[1]

Sources reveal that by the beginning of the fifteenth century, smaller communities had developed their own local performances, dramatizing the lives of their patron saints or Bible stories like the Flood, Abraham and Isaac, or their own versions of a passion play. Many of these community performances were complex and

costly. Records from Exeter, published in *Records of Early English Drama* (*Devon*), for example, list expenses totaling 17 shillings, 10 pence paid for costumes for the Corpus Christi celebrations in Exeter in 1415. That sum of money equaled the cost of 160 chickens or 20 sheep at the time.[2] This expense is just one indication of how much money communities were willing to lay out for their community performances. Other records from counties like Kent, Dorset, Cornwall, and so on, show payments made to guild members in compensation for the time they, or their apprentices, spent in rehearsal, and for the purchase of properties and costumes, like sacks of wheat to create the image of Lot's wife as a pillar of salt, purple satin gowns to costume Jesus, crimson vestments, and gloves and devils' coats. Costume expenses alone for a proposed passion play in New Romney (Kent) for the year 1560 totaled almost £10, more than a year's salary for a parish clerk. Total expenses for that proposed production were almost £50. Even the Easter sepulchers set up in small parishes sometimes involved what we would call "special effects"—machinery that lowered effigies of angels from above to open Jesus' tomb.[3] These performances were not the kind of religious plays performed by children in bathrobes with towels on their heads that we often think of today when a church nativity or passion play is advertised by a local church.

We also must consider the small populations of English cities and towns to appreciate fully the amount of community involvement in these activities. Excluding London, the largest cities in pre-modern England—Norwich, York, and Bristol—possessed only 12,000 to 15,000 inhabitants. Smaller cities like Chester and Lincoln had populations somewhere between 5,000 to 8,000 people. Most other towns had populations ranging from less than 400 to a little over 2,000 people. The population of New Romney, mentioned above, probably was less than 1000,[4] yet its detailed plans for the 1560 Passion play include ten speaking parts, an unspecified number of "tormenters" and "devils," and sixty-two other people assigned various tasks in what we would call "technical" aspects of the production.[5] A conservative estimate of the total number of New Romney inhabitants involved in the play, therefore, would be about eighty to one hundred, numbers equaling eight percent to ten percent of the population who were directly involved in mounting the play. In larger cities like York, Lincoln, and Chester, it is likely that similar percentages of citizens contributed to their play cycles. Their cycle plays lasted over two or three days, and involved the city authorities and most of the

trade and craft guilds combining their efforts and monies to mount the annual productions.[6] In terms of money, time, and effort, then, the tradition of religiously based performances put on by the laity were deeply embedded in the civic and popular culture of the small towns and the larger cities of pre-modern England.

The turmoil begun by Henry VIII's religious reforms and carried on through the reign of his son, Edward VI, disrupted this tradition. Even before Henry VIII's break with Rome, Humanist reformers in England were attempting to purge the church of what they considered superstition, sloth, and excess. Humanists also attacked what they perceived as the traditional church's propensity to wink at superstitious beliefs and impose itself between the laity and the "true" meaning of the Gospels.[7] As Henry's reforms got underway, some bishops called in the traditional playscripts for review and revisions so as to purge them of superstition or what they considered vulgarities. Many were never returned. Aside from the cycle plays of York, Chester, Wakefield and parts of the cycle now called "N Town," the following are the only extant playscripts from pre-Reformation England: *Mary Magdalen*, *Killing of the Children*, *The Conversion of St. Paul*, the Grocers' guild play from Norwich, *Creation and Adam and Eve*, *Abraham and Isaac*, the town of Croxton's *Play of the Sacrament*, Newcastle's *Noah*, the Cornish *Ordinala* (in Cornish), and a few fragments which appear to be actors' parts. By 1537 reformers' attacks upon medieval Catholicism began in earnest. All traditional holidays were abolished, except Christmas, Easter, the Annunciation, and the feasts of Sts. John the Baptist, Michael the Archangel, and George. Formal veneration of the saints was forbidden. Local authorities were ordered to punish citizens who abandoned work on traditional holidays, and some bishops forbade performances of any plays or festivities in churches or churchyards.[8]

In the 1540s the scriptural emphases of Protestant reformers intensified. Veneration of scripture approached sanctification, and some reformers began to believe it was sacrilege for anyone to portray ("counterfeit" was the word often used) God the Father or Christ. A parliamentary act of 1543 specified that "in no plays nor interludes they might make any expositions of Scripture."[9] First-generation Protestant reformers like John Bale used religious plays presenting anti-papal, pro-Protestant messages in the late 1530s.[10] However, when Henry VIII swung back towards a more Catholic stance in the 1540s, these plays were banned.[11] The shifting religious policies of the 1530s and 1540s must have made people

fearful of presenting any kind of religious theme, whether Catholic or Protestant.

The government of Henry's son and successor, Edward VI, was pronouncedly Protestant, as was Edward himself. For example, Spain's ambassador to England noted that Edward played an active role in the plan to bypass his Catholic sister Mary by naming his Protestant cousin Lady Jane Grey as his successor.[12] Edward's government introduced wide-sweeping changes in worship. Parishes were ordered to remove and destroy or sell off all statues, religious images and ornaments, and any other accoutrements that bore "popish" symbols, including "popish" vestments, and the costumes and properties owned by, or stored in, churches that previously had been used in religious plays—in short, to divest themselves of anything that represented the old religious order. Further, the libraries of the monasteries and other religious establishments dissolved by Henry VIII and Edward VI, and those of several parish churches as well, were sold off. Most playscripts used by players in towns and cities now disappeared into private hands never to be seen again. In 1549 penalties were enacted to punish anyone who performed plays that could be construed as criticisms of the new Protestant liturgy and practice. Two years later, in 1551, a proclamation outlawed all players except the King's Players and a small number of troupes under the patronage of Protestant lords, but even the performances and scripts of these "authorized" players needed the prior approval of Edward's Privy Council.[13]

All of these measures, and more, were reinforced by English bishops, their deputies, and royal officials who made frequent parish visitations to ensure local compliance with the mandated reforms.[14] Hence, the religious policies of Henry VIII and Edward VI deprived local, civic-sponsored drama of the holidays on which it could be performed, of the locations for its performance, of the traditionally accepted dramatic content, of the costumes and properties necessary for its performance, and even of the scripts that formed the bases for performances.[15] The parish and civic theatrical activity that had flourished for 200 years all over England disappeared within the six short years (1547-1553) of Edward's reign.

Recent scholarship argues that with the succession of Catholic Mary (1553-1558) most Englishmen returned to the Mass with far more enthusiasm than Elizabethan propaganda would admit,[16] but restoring the ruined and scattered accoutrements of traditional Catholicism was expensive and time-consuming. Churchwardens'

accounts reveal that much had been "scattered abroad," that much had been "spoiled and mangled," and that individuals had to be taken to court to recover the former possessions of some churches. In most parishes, the Protestant renovations carried out under Edward VI's orders necessitated a complete re-renovation of church interiors to restore them to Catholic practice.[17] Given these conditions, attempts to revive traditional parish and city drama were tepid. Only three full-scale attempts at revivals of local drama in smaller communities have come to light during Mary's reign—a St. Thomas à Becket pageant in Canterbury in 1554, Wakefield's *Corpus Christi* plays in 1555, and plans by New Romney to revive its passion play in the years between 1556 and 1560.[18]

With Elizabeth's succession in 1558 and her reversion to the Protestantism of her brother, attempts by smaller localities to revive local drama ceased. For example, despite the large sums spent to revive New Romney's passion play, it never in fact was performed. That is small wonder given the royal proclamation of 15 May 1559 that forbade performances by players

> wherein either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the common weal shall be handled or treated, being no meet matters to be written or treated upon, but by men of authority, learning and wisdom, nor to be handled before any audience but of grave and discreet persons.[19]

Larger communities, like Chester, Lincoln, Coventry, and York, attempted to preserve their cycle plays, but by the middle of Elizabeth's reign those cycle plays forever disappeared. Such probably was not the result of the gleeful acceptance throughout England of Elizabethan Protestantism, the "happie time of the gospell," as Matthew Hutton, Dean of York Cathedral, proclaimed his age in 1568 and as traditional historians have asserted.[20] The "popish plays of Chester,"[21] and Lincoln, Wakefield, Coventry, and York were not abandoned willingly; city authorities tried to accommodate their plays to the new "happie time of the gospell."

Whether these attempts to maintain some form of traditional civic pageantry were due to lingering Catholic sympathies or civic pride and prosperity is moot. Performances of the religious lessons in the traditional plays and their potential for local income were entwined. Chester's city fathers noted that the plays augmented the faith of the people and the "prosperity of this City." Accounts from York make it clear that local merchants increased sales, and other inhabitants received rental income for lodging and stables when York's cycle plays were performed.[22] Nonetheless, by the

1560s and 1570s, local authorities, it seems, ultimately became convinced that they needed to tinker with, alter, or revise their old religiously based plays so long dear to their citizenry, civic pride, and "pocketbooks." Elizabeth's government and church would tolerate no drama too closely based on Biblical episodes or seemingly tied to the old religion. Under attack from Elizabeth's government and church, city authorities tried to find ways to preserve their performances and please the queen. York's efforts provide us with an excellent case study of those efforts and the eventual abandonment of those attempts.

After almost two hundred years of annual performances, York's Corpus Christi cycle came to an end in the first half of Elizabeth's reign. Some scholars, like Glynne Wickham and Patrick Collinson,[23] have attributed that end to the problems of organization and financing, and at first glance York's records might lead to such conclusions. Closer scrutiny of York's dramatic records, however, suggests that the civic authorities and the guilds successfully addressed many, if not most, of those problems. But the dramatic records also reveal that its city fathers and guilds were unsuccessful in finding some way to maintain the city's performance traditions and make them conform to Queen Elizabeth's ecclesiastical and governmental injunctions.

York was the largest city in the north of England and the seat of the Archbishop of York, the second most powerful cleric in England. The city also was the seat of the Council of the North, established by Henry VIII to oversee the administration of England's northern counties and protect the border with Scotland. Therefore, although almost two hundred miles from London, York always was under the watchful eyes of ecclesiastical and political authorities at Court. However, York possessed a royal charter of self-governance. The city was governed by an elected lord mayor and three councils (the Aldermen, the Council of the Twenty-four, and the Council of Forty-eight), all dominated by the most powerful trade and craft guilds of the city.[24] Consequently, on occasion the officials of York declined to follow the lead of the central government. For instance, though York accepted the accession of Henry VII in 1485 after the death of Richard III at Bosworth Field, the official memorandum by the mayor and council (23 August 1485) did not brand Richard III a "usurper" as did official Tudor documents. The memorandum lamented, "King Richard, late mercifully reigning upon us, was through great treason . . . piteously slain and murdered, to the great heaviness of this city."[25]

The *Records of Early English Drama* provide many details concerning the production of the cycle plays and other performances sponsored by the city. Existing records date from the late 1300s, and become quite detailed about 1480. York's records are detailed enough that modern scholarship has been able to plot the route taken by the plays and their pageant wagons throughout the city. Those records list expenditures for performances of the Corpus Christi cycle plays, and occasional substitute plays, from 1484 to 1602. The expenses averaged about £142 per year[26]—an amount equal to twenty years labor to an Elizabethan workman.[27] About 51 percent per year was spent on food for the participants. Other expenditures included costs pertaining to the formal processions accompanying Corpus Christi celebrations (a little over 7 percent per year) and for the maintenance and building of pageant wagons (about 11 percent per year). For instance, in 1552, 84 pence was paid for a new pair of new wheels for a pageant wagon.[28]

Also recorded are payments to the pageant masters, rent for a chamber for the mayor to watch the celebrations, and payments to musicians and actors who took part in the performances.[29] Payments to actors averaged 185 pence per year. Musicians averaged 4 to 8 pence.[30] The discrepancy between payments to actors and musicians results from their respective numbers. Four to six musicians were involved in the processions, but scholars believe that the cycle plays required up to three hundred actors, and perhaps triple that number for what we would today call "stagehands."[31] Such numbers suggest that annually almost 7 percent of York's 15,000 citizens were involved directly in the productions of the cycle plays.

The Mercers' pageant accounts offer a glimpse into the lavishness of the individual plays. The Mercers' play was *The Last Judgment*. From the guild's inventory of 1433, and a notation in 1526 listing items received back from that year's pageant master, we find accoutrements for the play included

> a pageant wagon with 4 wheels; hell's mouth; 3 garments for 3 devils, 6 devils' faces in 3 versions [2-faced masks?]; array for 2 evil souls, that is to say 2 shirts, 2 pair hose, 2 masks & 2 wigs; array for 2 good souls, that is to say 2 shirts, 2 pair hose, 2 masks, & 2 wigs; 2 pair angel wings with iron in the ends; 2 trumpets of white [silver] plate; and 3 reds [garments?] and 4 albs for 4 Apostles; 3 diadems with 3 masks for 3 Apostles; 4 diadems with 4 wigs of yellow for 4 Apostles; a cloud & 2 pieces of rainbow of timber; array for God, that is to say a shirt, wounded

> [showing Christ's wounds?], a diadem with a mask, gilded; a great curtain of red damask painted for the back side of the pageant; 2 other lesser curtains for 2 sides of the pageant; 3 other curtains the sides of the pageant; a little curtain 4 squared to hang at the back of God; 3 irons to bear up heaven; 4 finale coterelles [special bolts?] & an iron pin; a frame of iron that God shall sit upon when He shall ascent up to heaven, with 4 ropes at 4 corners; a heaven of iron with a wooden pulley; 2 pieces of red clouds & stars of gold belonging to heaven; 2 pieces of blue clouds painted on both sides; 3 pieces of red clouds with sun beams of gold, 7 stars for the height's of heaven, with a long small border of the same work; 6 great angels holding the passion of God, one of them has a fan of laton [brass banner?] & a cross of iron gilded; 3 smaller angels gilded holding the passion; 9 smaller angels painted red to run about in the heaven; a long small cord to cause the angels run about; 2 short rolls of tree [wooden rollers?] to put forth the pageant.[32]

Given what this list says about the general elaborateness of costumes and properties, it is not surprising that on occasion guilds complained about the cost of the pageants and problems in their performance. A memorandum from 1399 listed complaints from the guilds about the costs of their respective pageants, and also dealt with problems of coordinating the progression of the various Corpus Christi plays as they moved throughout the city.[33]

The city fathers responded with ways to reduce and contain costs to individual guilds, such as requiring smaller guilds that did not participate in the performances to contribute money and personnel to guilds that did. They also granted the guilds' requests that no new pageants be added to the cycle and no new performance spaces be approved. Between 1422 and 1432 the separate plays of the Pinners and Painters (one showing the nailing of Christ to the cross, the other the rearing of the cross) were amalgamated, and so too were separate plays dealing with Christ before Pontius Pilate and Christ's condemnation by Pilate. Those amalgamations sought to simplify the cycle and speed up its progression from performance site to performance site. City authorities set up a system of fines to keep the annual productions moving smoothly. A fine of 80 pence would be levied on any guild whose pageant was not performed. Other fines were established for guilds, and members of guilds, that shirked specific, assigned duties. For example, in 1547 the Tailors' Guild as a whole was fined 40 pence for not carrying torches in the procession scheduled for the day after Corpus Christi, and three men were fined individually for non-

participation.[34] The heaviest fines were levied on guilds whose players arrived late at specified playing sites—thereby delaying the entire sequence of performances. In 1553 the Girdlers' Guild was fined 120 pence because its actors "tarried an whole hour."[35]

Other steps though the years were taken to address problems of costs and personnel in producing the cycle. In the 1540s, a city ordinance empowered the Tailors' Guild to collect money from its audiences. In 1555 the city attempted to supplement the costs of the Sledmen's pageant by ordering those who rented rooms or stable space to visitors to contribute to the Sledmen's pageant. In 1558 when the Painters complained that they had to pay more than the Pinners in mounting their joint pageant, city officials ordered the Pinners to match the contribution of the Painters. Individual guilds also took measures to insure continuance of the plays. In 1555 the Tailors' Guild required that anyone selling more than three yards of cloth in the market place must pay "pageant silver," and in 1577 the Bakers' guild began to require newer members to serve as the guild's pageant master before they could hire a new apprentice.[36]

At first glance these several entries in the records might seem to support Glynne Wickham's assertions about costs and poor organization bringing an end to the York cycle. Yet closer scrutiny shows that the costs of production were more than met by pageant income received from other sources. During the years 1484 to 1602, the annual average of £144.5 taken in from various sources actually exceeded the £142[37] spent on the cycle plays and other performances. And there was collateral income for York's citizens from the performances. For instance, from 1529 to 1531, the church of St. Michael's Spurriergate received twenty pence per year from the rental of the church house during Corpus Christi celebrations.[38] The city ordinance of 1555 ordering those who rented rooms or stables to contribute towards the Sledmen's pageant indicates that individuals profited from the annual performances. Craftsmen, vintners, and victualers surely increased their incomes from visitors who came to town to see the shows. Most problems concerning costs, therefore, seem to have been brought under control. As for Wickham's belief that the performances lacked centralized organization, the various steps taken by city officials and guilds over the years—specifications for performances, fines for non-compliance, ordinances to alleviate costs and personnel problems to the guilds—show that in reality there was a good deal of consistent and centralized oversight.

Throughout the records, however, are examples of the shifting policies of religious reform, from Edward VI to Mary I to Elizabeth I, that created problems the city fathers and the guilds could not overcome. Edward's religious reforms halted virtually all local, dramatic performance activities throughout most of England by 1548.[39] Attempts in York to accommodate Edward's reforms were made in 1548 and 1549, when the city fathers ordered that the Corpus Christi cycle should exclude the plays portraying the "dying of our Lady / assumption of our Lady / and Coronation of our Lady." Those particular plays were struck again in 1549, and in the next year the entire cycle was cancelled, ostensibly due to concerns about plague. Plague again was the official excuse when the cycle was cancelled in 1552.[40]

A year later, in 1553 after Catholic Queen Mary took the throne, the cycle was reinstated with the reintroduction of the Virgin Mary plays. By 1555 not only were the Corpus Christi plays performed "as been before," but also restored were the St. George's Day and Whitsun processions, both abolished under Edward. The expenses for the St. George procession reveal that many of the properties, and probably costumes, had been preserved during the reign of Edward VI. For example, 17 pence was spent repairing the dragon, the image of St. Christopher, and refurbishing the pageant wagon. A total of 305 pence[41] (between fifty to seventy-five days' wages for a worker[42]) was spent to revive the procession. St. George's procession continued annually until the accession of Elizabeth in 1558, after which it disappears from York's records. In 1558 the Corpus Christi plays also were suspended due to "troubles with wars and also contagious sickness."[43] The "troubles" perhaps refer to England's involvement in Phillip II's campaign in France or the campaign against the Scots fought in that year, or both, and also, perhaps, to Queen Mary's lingering illness and the uncertainties that illness portended for the future. As it turned out, Queen Mary died that autumn, and her successor, Elizabeth, reinstituted Edward's Protestant reforms within the first nine months of her reign.

After a lapse of three years, in 1561 the Corpus Christi plays were performed again, but, again, the Virgin Mary plays were removed, an attempt to re-Protestantize the cycle now that Elizabeth was on the throne. Among the entries for 1561 is one stating that since the feast of Corpus Christi was no more, the mayor and aldermen should not be garbed in their official scarlet robes as had been the custom, but in "seemly apparel."[44] It seems the city fathers were trying to suggest that their participation in the pageants and procession was not "official."

Records from 1562 through 1567 reveal that the Corpus Christi cycle continued to be performed,[45] but in 1562 those records also suggest that the city fathers were feeling the pressure of Elizabeth's reforms. In March of 1562 the city fathers ordered that performances of "the stories of the old & new testament or else the Creed play if apon examination it may be played" on St. Barnabas day, 11 June.[46] By divorcing the plays from Corpus Christi Day, perhaps the city fathers hoped to avoid the impression they were celebrating an abolished feast. No performances occurred in 1568, but in 1569 the cycle plays were performed again. However, performances that year were scheduled for the Tuesday of Whitsun week,[47] yet another attempt by the city fathers to divorce York's plays from any association with an abolished feast day. Nonetheless, the rescheduled performances of the plays still fell at about the same time of the year as the now defunct feast of Corpus Christi. Whitsun (Pentecost) falls seven weeks after Easter, and Corpus Christi Day is the first Thursday following the Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost,

Once the city fathers began to be queasy about performing the play cycle, they turned to another play in the city's possession. In 1446 a so-called *Creed Play* had been given to York's Fraternity of Corpus Christi. The sources describe the play as "containing pages of instruction and information about the Christian faith." From 1455 to 1535 the *Creed Play* substituted for the Corpus Christi plays about once every ten years. In 1568 the city fathers decided to revive the *Creed Play*, and brought the playbooks out of storage. Before scheduling any performances, a copy of the script was submitted to Matthew Hutton, Dean of York Cathedral, for his approval and revision.[48] This was his response:

> I have perused the books that your Lordship with your brethren sent me and as I find many things that I much like because of the antiquity, so see I many things, that I can not allow, because they be Disagreeing from the sincerity of the gospel, the which things, if they should either be altogether cancelled, or altered into other matter, the whole drift of the play shuld be altered, and therefore I dare not put my pen unto it, because I want both skill, and leisure, to amend it, though in goodwill I assure you if I were worthy to give your lordship and your right worshipfull brethren counsel: surely mine advise should be, that it should not be plaid for though it was plausible 40 yeares ago, & would now also of the ignorant sort be well liked: yet now in this 'happie time of the gospell,' I know the learned will mislike it and how the state will bear with it I know not.[49]

Not surprisingly, following the receipt of Hutton's letter, plans for the *Creed Play* were cancelled and the playbooks put back in storage. Interestingly, the script was not destroyed despite Dean Hutton's objections to its "inappropriate" theology. It looks as if York's authorities still were hedging their bets about the future of religious reforms even as late as ten years into Elizabeth's reign. However, no copy of the playbook has survived for modern perusal.

A *Pater Noster Play* also occurs sporadically in the York's records throughout the Tudor period. A performance is mentioned in records from 1495. In 1536 it was ordered that the *Pater Noster Play* should be played on the Sunday following St. Lamas' Day (1 August). The next mention of the play appears in 1559 after the accession of Elizabeth, when the Guild of St. Anthony was ordered to produce the play. The costs for the play were met by pageant money the guilds had collected for the now suspended Corpus Christi cycle. York's *Pater Noster Play* was again scheduled for performance in 1572 on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. Though not mentioned in the records, that is the day that used to be Corpus Christi Day. The guilds again were required to hand over their pageant money, and two men from each guild were required to accompany their respective guild's pageants and keep order during the performances. The play was performed at thirteen sites throughout the city, bearing a striking similarity to performances of the now suspended Corpus Christi cycle.[50]

But in that same year a "request" came to the city from Archbishop Grindal for the playbooks of the *Pater Noster Play*. The city sent Grindal a copy of the play as it was performed that year. After a lapse of three years, during which the playbook was not returned nor the *Pater Noster Play* performed, in 1575 city officials sent a delegation to the Archbishop so as to

> require of my Lord Archebishop his grace all such play books as pertaining this city now in his grace's Custody and that his grace will appoint two or three sufficiently learned to correct the same wherein by the law of this Realm they are to be reformed.

Meantime, three playbooks prepared for performance by St. Anthony's Guild were sent back to storage.[51] No record indicates Archbishop Grindal returned any playbooks. No record indicates the *Pater Noster Play* ever again was performed. No copy of that play is extant.

By 1578 the city fathers were displaying open ambivalence about local performance activities in York. That year they ordered

that no interludes or other "devices for assembling of the common people at the common Hall" could occur without the presence or license of the Lord Mayor. The cycle plays were scheduled for performance in 1579, but tentatively, with the provision that the playbooks first be submitted to the Archbishop for corrections or alterations. There is no record that the plays were performed in 1579.[52] It seems obvious that the citizens of York were concerned about the timidity of the authorities regarding the city's traditional performances. The next year (1580) the York's Commons formally petitioned the mayor and councils to schedule performances of the cycle.[53]

Unlike the dogged determination displayed by the city fathers to solve the guildsmen's complaints about costs and organization in the years before the Tudor religious turmoil, and unlike their manipulations in the 1560s and early 1570s to mount the cycle plays or some substitute, now, in 1580, the mayor responded that he "and his bretherin wold consider of their request."[54] Of course the mayor and "his bretherin" must have been aware of the troubles of the mayors of Chester who, despite injunctions from the Archbishop of York, mounted that city's Whitsun cycle plays in 1572 and 1574.

Chester, and its county of Cheshire, comprised a palatine territory possessing privileges, like York's, that made its governance semi-autonomous. Chester, like York, was slow in adapting to the Elizabethan religious settlement. As Jennifer McNabb writes, Chester had "a reputation for recusancy and religious deviance." She notes that as the royal regime attempted to impose standard church practices for marriage, "long after people in other areas of the country discontinued the practices of child marriage and spousals, those living in the northwest persisted in constructing marriage according to standards other than those propagated by the Elizabethan and early Stuart church." She further observes that "Cheshire residents frequently spoke of the rights and privileges of the palatinate as setting them apart from the rest of the country."[55] That independent spirit probably accounts for the staging of Chester's Whitsun cycle in the face of specific prohibitions by the Archbishop of York.

Such defiance did not go unnoticed. The mayor of 1572 was reprimanded harshly, after offering the lame excuse that the Archbishop's injunction had arrived after the performances. In 1574, when Chester's Whitsun plays were performed again—"with such reformation as Mr. Mayor with his advice shall think meet & convenient"—the consequences were swift and severe. Servants

of the President of the Council of the North arrested the then mayor the day he left office, and he was sent to London to answer for allowing the "popish plaies of Chester to be playd."[56] Needless to say, the Chester cycle was never performed again. Nor, after 1580, are there further references to the cycle plays, or any other religiously based plays, in York. In 1592 the city fathers of York forbade the performance of plays in the Common Hall and St. Anthony's Hall. By that time it appears most of the paraphernalia connected to the cycle plays had been sold off or dismantled. In 1594 the green that housed the Merchants' Guild's pageant wagon was sold to an alderman for his personal use.[57]

Still, the city fathers searched for some secular alternative. In 1583 Thomas Grafton, the local schoolmaster, wrote a play for the Midsummer Watch. Details in the records are too scanty to speculate about the content of the play, but it seems to have become a large production by 1585. That year Schoolmaster Grafton presented the city fathers with a bill for expenses totaling 48 pence "for painting about the hearse in the first pageant, a crown for the angell, spangles for his shirt, the mending of the Queen's crown, painting of the child one of the furies bare, with some other trifles." The guilds contributed £6.8 (about 272 days' wages to a laborer) towards the production, sent drummers about town to advertise the show, brought out their pageant wagons, and put on a feast for the city fathers. Performances of the 1585 Midsummer play seem to have followed a route throughout the city strikingly similar to that used by the Corpus Christi cycle.[58] Thus, after 1580 pageant masters continued to be elected, and the guilds contributed money towards Midsummer March just as they had in the past for the *Creed Play*, *Pater Noster Play*, Corpus Christi cycle, and St. George's Day and Whitsun processions. But the non-religious Midsummer Watch, with its play and marching town militia, seems to have become the only "approved" form of local performance in York.

In those same years, traveling troupes of aristocratic-sponsored, "professional" players (like Shakespeare's) began to appear frequently in York, a marked change in the pattern of performance activity in the city. In the ninety years between 1446 and 1536, when local performances for St. George's Day, Whitsun, and Corpus Christi were at their height, only six troupes of visiting players appear in the York records. All were from nearby towns, bringing their own towns' plays for performance in York.[59] After 1536, when Henry VIII's religious reforms began to take effect, no nearby town troupes visited York, but six aristocratic-sponsored troupes played there, including those licensed under King Henry

VIII and his favorite, and former brother-in-law, Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk.[60] As Protestant reforms waxed and waned under Edward VI and Mary, no traveling troupes of players performed in York, reflecting the restrictions placed on travel and non-licensed players by each of those regimes.[61]

After Elizabeth's accession in 1558 and up until 1574, six acting troupes traveling under the patronage of aristocrats (including the Queen's Men) played at York.[62] Those were the years, as we have seen, that York's officials strove to accommodate their local dramatic repertory to Elizabeth's religious injunctions. After 1574, when it is clear from York's records that the city fathers were becoming stymied or timid (or both) about mounting local performances, the number of aristocratic-sponsored troupes visiting York mushroomed. From 1574 until the end of Elizabeth's reign, sixty aristocratic-sponsored acting troupes, including the Queen's Men (fourteen times), performed in York. The city's records reveal, on average, two performances per year by traveling "professional" acting companies.[63]

That same pattern is reflected throughout Tudor England. Up into the reign of Henry VIII, before religious reforms began, dramatic activity was centered in local performances. There were comparatively few aristocratic-sponsored acting troupes. In terms of touring activity, that, too, was dominated by performances given by town troupes visiting neighboring towns. For instance, in 1535 the small town of Boxford, Suffolk, toured its play to twenty-two nearby towns, earning enough money to build a new steeple for its church. From the late 1400s until about 1535, the Kentish towns of New Romney, Lydd, and Hythe regularly hosted one another's players every few years. With the beginnings of Henry VIII's religious reforms, most touring by local acting troupes sharply declined, and by the time Elizabeth came to the throne, the on-again, off-again Protestant religious policies had brought virtually all local dramatic activities, except those in cities like York and Chester, to a stand-still.[64]

Yet Elizabeth's accession also brought a new form of dramatic activity for Tudor England, the "professional" acting company bearing the name of a titled peer of the realm. Whether born out of a search for alternative entertainment, aristocratic notions of prestige, or government propaganda and "control," aristocratic acting companies exploded almost as soon as Elizabeth came to the throne. Records to date reveal at least seventy acting companies sponsored by peers and peeresses active during her reign, and fifty-one of those seventy companies (73 percent) had no antecedents in the reigns of her Tudor predecessors.

Most of the Elizabethan aristocratic-sponsored "professional" troupes spent their time and earned their money touring the English towns that no longer offered local drama. We must remember that in Shakespeare's heyday, only two acting companies—the Admiral's and Chamberlain's men—were based in London. The Queen's own acting company is a case in point. In the first five years of Elizabeth's reign, the Queen's Men appear over fifty times in provincial records in counties all over the realm. Like most of the other "licensed" companies of actors, touring was the main activity of the Queen's Men. In dramatic records published to date, Court appearances account for only 7 percent of performances by the Queen's Men. Similarly, famous acting companies—like those of the Earls of Leicester, Sussex, and Pembroke, and Lord Strange—plied their trade mostly in the provinces. And they made good livings, filling the entertainment gap created by the demise of local, religious theatre. Provincial records point to the fact that, per performance, an actor in those touring companies earned more money than the provincial master mason or master carpenter sitting in his audience.[65] Perhaps as a Stratford schoolboy, Shakespeare attended nearby Coventry's cycle plays (which like York's and Chester's limped along into the second quarter of Elizabeth's reign) and was bitten by the "theatre bug," but without the demise of these last vestiges of local, religious drama in Tudor England in the 1570s, it seems unlikely the "professional" theatre in which William Shakespeare thrived would have emerged.

Notes

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2. *Records of Early English Drama: Devon*, ed. John M. Wasson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 17, 360, 382 (henceforth *REED*); *REED: Bristol*, ed. Mark C. Pilkinton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 18.

3. *Malone Society Publication: Records of Plays and Players in Kent, 1450-1642*, ed. Giles E. Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 135, 207-11; Alison Hanham, ed., *Churchwardens' Accounts of Ashburton, 1479-1580* (Torquay: Devonshire Press, 1970), 154; *REED: Dorset, Cornwall*, ed. Rosalind Conklin Hays, C. E. McGee, Sally Joyce, and Evelyn S. Newlyn (1999), 267-68, 471-73; *REED: Devon* 17, 360, 382.

4. Jacqueline Bower, "Kent Towns 1540-1640," in *Early Modern Kent*, ed. Michael Zell (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2000), 146.

5. *Malone Society: Plays and Players in Kent*, 189-202.

6. Wickham, *Medieval Theatre*, 62-99; Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2:113-46.

7. Richard Marius, *Thomas More* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 83, 89-90, 286-87.

8. John C. Coldeway, "The Non-cycle Plays and the East Anglian Tradition," in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 194-99; Ian Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: A Chronological Topography to 1558* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 289; Wickham, *Medieval Theatre*, 206-207.

9. Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 23-27, and his *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: St. Martin's Press: 1988), 95-98; Robert Ashton, "Popular Entertainment and Social Control in Later Elizabethan and Early Stuart London," *London Journal* 9 (1983): 5, 6; Gilbert Burnett, *The History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1816), 583.

10. Paul Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 12-41; Jeffrey Leininger, "Evangelical 'Enterludders': Patronage and Playing in Reformation England," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 4 (2002): 65-71.

11. Collinson *Birthpangs of Protestant England*, 102-104.

12. Royall Taylor, ed., *Calendar of Letters, Dispatches, and State Papers Relating to the Negotiation between England and Spain*, vol. 11 (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1944-59), 191, 70-71; Alison Plowden, *The House of Tudor* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), 147-52.

13. Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts*, 70-72; White, *Theatre and Reformation*, 42-63.

14. Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 166-83, 208-11; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 395, 461-86; Susan Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: The Rule of the Tudors, 1485-1603* (London: Penguin, 2000), 126-31, 175, 185-90.

15. Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts*, 63, 68, 203, 205, 289.

16. Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 43-100.

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18. Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts*, xxix-xxx; James H. Forse, "Pleasing the Queen but Preserving Our Past: Cheshire and Lincolnshire Attempt to Continue Their Cycle Play and Satisfy Elizabeth's Injunctions," *Popular Culture Review* 18 (2007): 99-108.

19. Proclamation cited in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 263; see also Forse, "Pleasing the Queen," 99-108.

20. *REED: York*, ed. Alexandra F. Johnson and Margaret Rogerson (1979), 353; Dairmaid MacCulloch, "The Myth of the English Reformation, c. 1529-1642," *Journal of British Studies* 30 (1991): 1-19.

21. Quotations are from *REED: Chester*, ed. Lawrence M. Clopper (1979), 111; and *REED: York*, 353. Except for a few places to keep the "color" of the language, quotations from sources are rendered into modern English.

22. *REED: Chester*, 27; Joyce W. Percy, ed., *York Memorandum Book*, Surtees Society Publication, vol. 186 (Gateshead: Northumberland Press, 1973]), passim.

23. Wickham, *Medieval Theatre*, 187; and Collinson, *Birthpangs of Protestant England*, 100-102.

24. *REED: York*, ix-x.

25. R. Davies, ed., *Extracts from the Municipal Records of the City of York during the Reigns of Edward IV, Edward V and Richard III*, (London: 1843), 217-18.

26. *REED: York*, 135-502.

27. *REED: Bristol*, 129-30.

28. *REED: York*, 306.

29. Ibid., 135-502. For the probable route of the plays see Meg Twycross, "The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 39-42; and an animated web site: http://jerz.setonhill.edu/resources/PSim/index.html.

30. *REED*: *York*, 292-306.

31. Hutton, *Rise and Fall of Merry England*, 43.

32. *REED*: *York*, 55-56, 156-57, 160, 241-42.

33. Ibid., 697-98.

34. Ibid., 246-51, 283.

35. Ibid., 291, 312, 697-98; Richard Beadle, "The York Cycle," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 101-104.

36. *REED*: *York*, 299-301, 308, 311, 320-21, 332, 342-79, 384.

37. Ibid., 135-502.

38. C. C. Webb, ed., *The Churchwardens' Accounts of St Michael, Spurriergate, York 1518-1548*, vol. 1 (York: University of York, 1997), 1-5.

39. James H. Forse, "The Flow and Ebb of Touring Amateur Acting Troupes in Tudor England," *SRASP* 22 (1999), 47-68.

40. *REED*: *York*, 291-95.

41. Ibid., 289, 291-93, 295, 303, 307.

42. *REED*: *Bristol*, 129-30.

43. *REED*: *York*, 320-27.

44. Ibid., 331-33.

45. Ibid., 340-50.

46. Ibid., 340.

47. Ibid., 354-55.

48. Ibid., 131, 177, 200, 236, 257, 285, 353, 755, 764-71.

49. Ibid., 353.

50. Ibid., 178, 262, 327-78, 365-68.

51. Ibid., 365-68, 377-78.

52. Ibid., 384-85, 390, 393.

53. Ibid., *York*, 393.

54. Ibid.

55. Jennifer McNabb, "Fame and the Making of Marriage in Northwest England, 1560-1640," *Quidditas* 26-27 (2006): 12-15 (*Quidditas* is an e-journal, accessible at http://humanities.byu.edu/rmmra).

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57. *REED*: *York*, 449, 459.

58. Ibid., 417-23.

59. Ibid., 67, 77, 243.

60. Ibid., 269, 273, 281.

61. Forse, "Flow and Ebb of Touring Troupes," 47-68.

62. John T. Murray, *English Dramatic Companies 1558-1642*, vol. 2 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 411; *REED*: *York*, 501.

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64. Christine Sustek Williams, "Hocking and Ploughing: Performative Money-Makers in Tudor Suffolk," *SRASP* 26 (2003), 23-39; Forse, "Flow and Ebb of Touring Troupes," 47-68.

65. James H. Forse, "Getting Your Name Out There: Traveling Acting Companies and Royal and Aristocratic Prestige in Tudor England," *Quidditas* 26-27 (2006): 91-140 (*Quidditas*, is an e-journal, accessible at http://humanities.byu.edu/rmmra).