Since the 1950s something of a revolution has occurred in the study of Early English drama. To some extent that revolution was long overdue, for the subject had been dominated far longer than other areas of medieval studies by the ‘evolutionary’ thesis of English literature that had been persuasively expounded for medieval drama by E.K. Chambers in 1903. Chambers’ true concern was the drama of Shakespeare, and his two-volume Mediaeval Stage was a mere by-product of this interest, an attempt to explain how the complex organism of Shakespearean drama evolved from the more primitive creatures of earlier dramatic and ceremonial activities. Chambers discovered a drama already languishing under the label ‘pre-Shakespearean’ and available to the general reader in anthologies unappetisingly entitled ‘Specimens’ of early drama; his work gave scholarly credence to this patronising view, which predominated until critics of the 1960s such as O.B. Hardison and V.A. Kolve discarded such ‘goal-seeking’ approaches and discovered in medieval drama a variety of autonomous art-forms created for acting-areas very different in shape and function from the later Elizabethan commercial theatres.

Help for this revaluation came from an unexpected quarter, the 1951 Festival of Britain. To celebrate the event, the city of York decided to produce a skeletal version of its medieval play-cycle. After prolonged legal argument about the blasphemy laws and the threat of disruption by Christian evangelicals, the production proved a commercial success and demonstrated the values of such texts as practical theatre. Today medieval plays are regularly per-
formed as summer tourist-attractions in major English cities such as Chester, Coventry, Lincoln and York. The interest of professional actors was caught; the Medieval Players Company was formed to tour early plays, and adaptations for the professional theatres were made — most recently, *The Mysteries*, produced at the National Theatre and based on York’s cycle. Simultaneously, theatre historians became interested in staging the plays in ways felt to be more true to the original staging-conditions; ambitious reconstructions of original productions have been presented on university campuses at Leeds and at Toronto and companies for the production of early plays formed at Toronto, Lancaster and Liverpool. Welcome though this practical concern is, however, the production of any play powerfully presents to a perhaps unwary audience the preconceptions about this kind of drama held by the producer. Behind any production of a medieval play is an idea of medieval man, and though modern revivals have made the public familiar with medieval drama, they have also fixed certain assumptions about it in the popular mind.

Such literary and dramatic interest led inevitably to curiosity about the contexts for early plays. The pioneering researches of Glynne Wickham at Bristol in the 1960s demonstrated that medieval drama was part of a much wider complex of ceremonial activity — tournaments, processions, royal entries and the like — than had been recognised, and that all this activity served functional social, economic and political needs. The Middle Ages had, in fact, no self-contained area called ‘drama’ and did not isolate plays from daily existence as we do by setting aside special buildings, times and performers for its production. Early drama is a socially engaged art-form, its texts as much social as literary documents. In the 1970s the International Society for the Study of Medieval Drama was founded to draw together scholars from different disciplines into collaborative activity. In 1979 the first volumes of the Records of Early English Drama appeared. This international research-project, based in Toronto, is systematically seeking out, transcribing and publishing all documentary references to drama, minstrelsy and ceremonial in England before 1642. Documentary evidence of this kind has made possible the close investigation of location and timing, of the kind of people involved in play-productions, and allows us to assess some possible expectations of their audiences.

An enterprise essential to this revived interest has been
the preparation of new editions of the extant English play-texts on principles somewhat different from the philo-
logical and textual concerns of the nineteenth-century editions which were still the ‘standard’ texts in the 1970s.12
In the course of preparing these editions, the manuscripts have been closely rescrutinised and their evidence re-
valued, taking account of the known circumstances of production, the kind of people who owned the manuscripts,
and the uses to which they were applied. We now recognise how far the book-creating priorities of a scribe or a com-
mittee may diverge from the practical interests of actor and producer, and hence how untrustworthy a manuscript may be as guide to the actualities of performance.13
The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how these converging interests have helped us to appreciate more fully one kind of medieval drama – those great sequences of biblical plays performed in major English towns by craft and trading companies which since the mid-eighteenth century we have called ‘mystery plays’ after the religious mystery which is their subject. The Middle Ages were more likely to have called them ‘Corpus Christi Plays’, after the feast of Corpus Christi on which such plays were often performed. And one strand of modern criticism would emphasise the appropriateness of the plays to this occa-
sion.14
Instituted in 1311, the Feast honoured the real presence of God in the Eucharist and, by extension, acknowledged the power of the ordained priesthood to effect that trans-
substantiation. But if the Church supplied the occasion, the sacrament and the liturgy, medieval towns offered an appro-
priate celebratory genre, the civic procession, in which the various manufacturing and trading organisations or ‘guilds’ recognised by a town processed on major civic occasions in company liveries in a traditional hierarchical order, offering a corporate image of power, harmony and splendour. Trans-
ferred to Corpus Christi – a Feast whose date varied between 23 May and 24 June according to the date of Easter – such a procession, bearing torches, escorted Almighty God in the ‘real presence’ of the consecrated Host like a secular king on a triumphal entry through the streets. The whole spectacle offered a mutual endorsement of Christian ideology and the civic order which sustained the material Church and was sustained by its faith. Although we do not know why a dramatic performance became an adjunct of this celebration, it obviously continues this same mutuality
A.D. Mills

— "in honour and reverence of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the glory and benefit of the same city" as a York document of 1399 puts it.  

The play-sequence which in some towns supplemented or replaced the Corpus Christi procession is a uniquely English genre. Within an overall chronological frame, beginning with God’s creation of the angels and the universe and ending at the Last Judgement, the companies enacted significant interventions by God in human history, centring on the birth, ministry and Passion of Christ. Hence on Corpus Christi day there were two very different acts of historical commemoration. The Church commemorated the institution of its central sacrament in a liturgy aspiring to fixedness and permanence – an unchanging Latin text, with set ritual gestures and ceremonial, which was re-enacted every year. The town provided a play-sequence organised chronologically as a history play and presented in a vernacular text that was contingent upon changing circumstances – the priorities of writers, actors, and directors; the theological and political pressures within the town and nation; and the economic and social condition of the town which determined the rise and fall of trades and their ability to fund productions. Structured as a history play, a cycle was ironically subject to the forces of history itself, and its texts were therefore ephemeral. It is usual to say that we have fragments of cycles from places such as Norwich, Coventry or Newcastle and more complete texts from Chester, York, Wakefield and one other place still unidentified. Even, however, disregarding the question-marks that now hang over the status of the last two manuscripts, what we have is only one authorised version of a living art-form that went through many authorised forms in a period of some two centuries. Indeed, as we shall see, the creation of a play-book may well signal the end of a cycle as a living art-form.

'THE NATIVITY' IN THE CHESTER CYCLE

The plays provided popular access to a mysterious past. Linguistically, they reworked material originating in another language – the Latin of the Vulgate Bible and other authorised texts which were not available in direct translation, though vernacular summaries and paraphrases existed and influenced the dramatists. Historically, they drama-
tised events originating in an alien culture, the Jewish society of the Old and New Testaments. But playwrights had considerable freedom in the way they made this past relevant to their contemporaries.

The sixth play of Chester's twenty-four/twenty-five play cycle, ‘De Salutatione et Nativitate Salvatoris Jesu Christi’ (‘Concerning the Salutation and the Nativity of the Saviour Jesus Christ’), which was performed by the Wrights (carpenters), offers a fascinating example of how one playwright undertook his task. Today the play's title perhaps has overtones of Primary School Christmas celebrations. We rightly guess that it includes Gabriel's Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, her visit to Elizabeth, Joseph's understandable suspicions of his pregnant wife, their journey to Bethlehem to fulfil the demands of the general tax, and the birth of Jesus in a stable there. But this familiar biblical material is intercut in this play by legendary material which originated in the apocryphal gospels of the New Testament and had been transmitted through Latin compendia such as The Golden Legend. In Chester this material reached the cycle through a vernacular verse narrative called A Stanzaic Life of Christ which, its editor suggests, had been composed in the city in the fourteenth century. From it our playwright drew Mary's vision on the way to Bethlehem, the two midwives at Christ's birth, and his most extensive addition - the legend of Octavian's conversion. The play moves from Joseph's house at Nazareth to the Emperor's court at Rome, partly to show why Octavian ordered the general tax but more importantly to evaluate the pax Romana into which the Prince of Peace was born. The Roman senate believe that the long peace and prosperity of Octavian's rule must be a sign of his divinity and request his deification, but Octavian recognises his own mortality and rejects the offer. He then consults a sibyl who foretells the birth of a child of greater power than he. The action returns to Bethlehem for the birth, but then reverts to Rome, where Octavian is granted a vision of the Virgin and Child in a star and orders his countrymen to worship the Child. In the course of the play the pax Romana is shown to have been based upon a primitive kind of early warning system, the Temple of Peace, contrived by a fiend, so that Rome always had advance notice of rebellion. At Christ's birth, the structure collapsed, and subsequently a church has been built to commemorate the vision.

What perhaps surprises us is the confidence of the
playwright. His stage is a small waggon, his actors paid guildsmen. But he has been bold in his selection of material and in his sharp intercutting of locations. Both stable and court are presumably occupied throughout the central episodes, one freezing into tableau as the action moves to the other. There is clearly a deliberate shaping purpose to the action which involves more than realising the historical event of the Nativity.

Our awareness of both structural discontinuity and a shaping purpose is sharpened by the intrusion into a historical action of a voice from the present. Although at one point this is supplied by the complaint to Octavian’s messenger by Joseph, in other instances it is the voice of a contemporary Expositor who steps between the audience and the play and comments upon the action with the knowledge of hindsight. He abridges the action; he marks the transitions to and from Rome; he supplies additional information. And he authenticates the non-Scriptural material, assuring us of its validity. The miracle of the midwife is attested by one ‘Freere Bartholemewe’ and the Temple of Peace is recorded ‘in cronicles expresse’ (572). Octavian’s conversion is validated archaeologically by the ruins of the Temple and by the church of St. Mary in Ara Caeli which are both to be seen in Rome ‘as men knowe that there have binne’ (706). Finally, standing in front of the tableaux of the worshipping Holy Family and the Emperor’s worshipping court, the Expositor offers the action as an example to the contemporary world:

_that unbeleeffe is a fowle sinne, as you have seene within this playe._

(721–22)

The overview of the Expositor and the audience is denied to the characters within the historical action of the play, each of whom has only limited understanding of the scheme of which they are part. Bethlehem and Rome are distinct locations, the contrasting worlds of poverty and wealth, humility and power, subject and ruler. To Joseph, the Emperor is a remote figure who cares little for the burdens of the poor (389–416). To Octavian, the Child is a mystery – he does not know where He is born or exactly for what future purpose (675–9). We alone see the concerns which draw the Holy Family into the ambit of Octavian or can link the Child in the stable with the star that changes the Emperor’s life. Only we see the potential of the final
symmetrical tableaux – the young Mary, aged Joseph and two midwives revering the Christ-child in Bethlehem while the young sibyl, aged Octavian and two senators adore the star in Rome. The action from start to finish is moved primarily by forces outside the understanding and control of its characters. We are confronted immediately with this external moving power in Gabriel’s abrupt entry at the start. A ‘simple mayden of my degree’ (7) becomes mother of God. The miracle of a virgin giving birth converts a midwife (525–32), while the withering and healing of her own hand converts her doubting companion (533–63). A pagan sibyl foretells the future and forestalls the delusions of the Emperor (349–72). A miraculous vision effects his conversion (644–90). The past is a world of wonders – the Expositor adds to them accounts of a magical temple of peace (572–635); three suns in the sky turning into one (636–9); and the ox and ass kneeling to Christ (640–3). All, however, are a kind of code left by God for later generations to interpret fully.

The human reason to those locked in this world is comically inadequate. Joseph crudely misinterprets his wife’s pregnancy as evidence of infidelity (123–60). The senators misinterpret the pax Romana as a sign of godhead when it is in fact the reverse (297–312); their reverential attitude is already undercut by a jesting exchange between Octavian and his impudent messenger so indelicate that one scribe felt impelled to omit most of it (274–96). Joseph mistakenly believes that his role as surrogate father of Christ permits him to challenge Caesar’s messenger on the burdens of state taxation on the self-employed (405–12), a challenge that gains force from the fact that Joseph the Carpenter is played by a Chester carpenter, hence this represents a different ‘voice of the present’ from the Expositor’s. And, despite Mary’s painless delivery, the midwife, recruited from the town (of Chester or Bethlehem?), logically denies virgin birth and still startles modern audiences with her gynaecological investigation of Mary (537–9; cf the stage-direction following 539 – ‘Tunc Salome tentabit tangere Mariam in sexu secreto’). Though authenticated and meaningful, this episode is offered to Post-Reformation Cestrians as comic relief – ‘take hit in sporte’ (95), advise the Banns (see below). Such is the recurring effect of this voice of worldly wisdom.

In fact, the thematic centre of the play lies outside the events it dramatises. Its focus is the historical changes that
the coming of Christ inaugurates. The elect status of the lowly Mary becomes emblematic of a wider process of change which will elevate the Gentiles (Octavian) and remove from the Jews their elect position. Mary, journeying to Bethlehem, has a vision of two groups of people – one rejoicing and one lamenting – and is told by her attendant Angel that the rejoicing group are the Gentiles whom Christ has come to save, while the lamenting group are the Jews who will not acknowledge Christ’s incarnation and who will therefore incur God’s anger (429–52). Octavian’s conversion heralds that transfer also. The Emperor is a rational pagan who knows that earthly peace and prosperity are not signs of godhead and, when offered deification, rejects it on the grounds of his human mortality and impending death:

And godhead askes in all thinge
tyme that hath noe begininge
ne never shall have endinge;
and none of this have I.
(329–32)

His acknowledgement of the Child’s superior power is confirmed by the downfall of the pagan temple of peace and its supercession by a Christian church, a different order of power and peace. The past here is valued as an index of change, as the staging ground for the historical revelation of God’s purpose by means as unfamiliar as they are true. Their significance can be seen only from the vantage point of the enlightened present.

THE CHESTER CYCLE

The features of this play typify those of the collection as a whole. Chester’s cycle presents history as the progressive revelation to Man of the purpose originally formed in the mind of God. God’s lines which open play I affirm that controlling will:

Ego sum alpha et oo,
primus et novissimus.
It is my will it shoulde be soe;
hit is, yt was, it shalbe thus.
(Play 1, 1–4)

As time and the cycle unfold, God uses individuals and nations for his purpose and grants them some indication of
his intention through prophecies and signs, all of which are validated by reference to or direct quotation from the Scriptures or from other authoritative sources such as Augustine or Jerome.\(^{26}\) The cycle’s twenty-four/twenty-five plays display the pattern of its progressive unfolding—Adam’s fall (Play 2), where Adam has already been shown his later redemption; the Flood, and God’s covenant with Noah (Play 3); Abraham’s exemplary obedience and the promise of the elect state of the Jews (Play 4); and the establishment of a conquering Jewish nation under Moses’ leadership, guided by the Decalogue (Play 5). We can now begin to see how the shift of grace dramatised in the Nativity play (Play 6) is accommodated to this pattern, and can move on to Christ’s promise to his disciples at the Last Supper that

\[
\text{the tyme is come}
\]

\[
\text{that sygnes and shadowes be all donne.}
\]

(Play 15, 69–70)

—the coded messages will be superseded. The modern age of faith is ushered in at Pentecost when the apostles, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, compose the Apostles’ Creed (Play 21). Finally, as the damned are carried to Hell at Doomsday (Play 24), the four Evangelists step forward to announce the completion of purpose and cycle (677–708)—what began in the mind of God is now accessible to the mind of Man through their writings, and modern man has the knowledge that his predecessors possessed only in part. Total meaning emerges only when we stand at the end of the text and look back across the pattern it reveals, as individual figures within the cycle cannot.

So, for example, in the fourth play Abraham exchanges a tenth part of the spoils of war with the Gentile priest-king Melchisadek who gives him bread and wine (65–112). He circumcises his son Isaac at God’s command (177–92—the performers are, after all, the Barber-Surgeons!), and later is willing to sacrifice him (217–24). From Abraham’s standpoint, these automatic responses to apparently meaningless circumstances simply earn merit for him and his descendants. But guided by our Expositor, intruding once more into the action, we can with hindsight recognise the prefigurations of tithing (129–36) and the Eucharist (121–28), the sacrament of Baptism (193–208) and the sacrifice of Christ (460–75) which supersede these ritual acts and make them signs meaningful for the later Church.
In contrast, in the penultimate play (Play 23), of 'The Coming of Antichrist', it is Antichrist who affirms power by 'mervelles thinges' (410) – turning trees upside down, raising the dead, effecting his own mock Resurrection, and imparting his version of the Holy Spirit. He is defeated not by counter-miracles but by the theology and sacrament of the Church wielded by the prophets Enoch and Elijah – that is, by the means accessible to the modern Christian. The age of wonders is passed.

'THE FIRST TRIAL BEFORE PILATE' IN THE YORK CYCLE

For a different model of the past certainly available to Chester we need only glance across the Pennines to the uneven patchwork of York’s cycle – at, for example, the Tapiters and Couchers’ play of ‘Christ’s First Appearance before Pilate and the Dream of Pilate’s Wife’ (Play 30). This play looks at the presentation of the case against the captured Christ by the Jewish High Priests Caiaphas and Annas before the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate up to the point at which Pilate passes the prisoner on to the local administrator, Herod. But here the politics of Jerusalem are translated into the social institutions of fifteenth-century England. Christ, representing contemporary faith, is relegated to the role of test-case in a battle for social and dramatic supremacy between the pagan Roman governor – an aristocratic sybarite who boasts authority delegated by the emperor in person – and the priests – whose position within their subject-nation is guaranteed by their intellectual superiority as men learned in Jewish Law. The three seem to have reached an amicable working relationship; Pilate invites the Priests to sit with him on the dais rather than occupy the lower seats while they sort this problem out (275–9), a routine deal between equals. But word comes from Pilate’s Wife of a dream – sent by the devil – which threatens the end of the family’s luxurious life-style if Jesus is put to death; the Jews become uneasy. Then Pilate’s Beadle bows to Christ, and the Priests anxiously urge Pilate to assert his authority. Pilate, unsettled and suspicious, satisfies himself that the Beadle means no harm, and as the Priests continue to protest, he sends them back to their seats and demands that a court of law be formally convened (365–79). The procedures of this court, its decorum and rules of evidence, structure the action and provide a
framework within which Pilate can repeatedly score off the Jews, mocking them for the inadequacies of their Law and their failure to fulfil their legal responsibilities. Appropriately, he then finds Christ wrongly referred to him in the first place and sends him on to Herod with a tart reminder that that Jew, too, has forgotten his responsibilities and owes tribute to Rome (524–48).

York has thus reconceived the past in terms of the present. It has taken some care to consider the action in terms of social and political relationships and to present it as on-going and constantly developing. All have access to the same area of knowledge. The action is controlled and directed by the familiar framework of the courtroom, with its hierarchy of seats, formal costumes and procedures and clear levels of responsibility. Cross-questioning, debate on points of law, and constant allusions to law and rank characterise the speeches. The court becomes an arena in which personal interests are veiled in public order.

Critics have often claimed that York uses its scriptural material as the basis of social criticism and find in the cycle a hidden manifesto in which Christ represents the downtrodden poor and the power structures of medieval society are laid bare. The context of York’s productions suggests otherwise, however – that the cycle relocates contemporary institutions within a context of pagan unbelief as a warning of what can occur when political power is divorced from a containing Christian ideology. In the Carpenters’ play of ‘The Resurrection’ Pilate, having bribed the watch to lie about Christ’s rising, becomes a sort of inverted Expositor who offers this cynical moral to the audience:

Thus schall Pe sothe be bought and solde
And treasoune schall for trewthe be tolde,
Perfore ay in youre hartis ye holde
Pis counsaile clene.
(Play 38, 449–52)

In so doing, however, he reveals only his own limitations of vision as a materialistic pagan; the audience knows better, and can rest assured that its civic leaders do as well. Such use of the past as a lever on the present is far from Chester’s approach.

THE CONTEXTS OF THE CYCLES

To explain why these two cycles are so different, we have
to look to the circumstances of their production. York’s cycle is first mentioned in 1376, the earliest reference to an English cycle; Chester’s in 1422. Both are already established by that time, and we have no means of telling how much earlier they might have begun, although since both during the fifteenth century were performed at the Feast of Corpus Christi and were accordingly called ‘Corpus Christi Plays’, we know that they cannot antedate the institution of that feast in 1311. But early evidence is one-sided; York has very full records of its drama during the fifteenth century but Chester’s records are few and random. Nevertheless it is clear that both towns towards the end of the century sought to bring their respective cycles under closer civic control, but to different ends.

York’s problems seem to have been primarily administrative, produced by the scale of its production. Each company took responsibility for playing one of the city’s forty-eight or more plays on a movable stage or pageant-waggon which was manhandled along a traditional route with performances at ten to thirteen playing-places or stations within a single day. Moreover, as others have shown, from 1417 York marketed annually to the highest bidders all the stations except the officially designated ones. Wealthy and prominent citizens thus gained status by ostentatiously having the cycle played at their door and might recoup their investment by selling seats on scaffolds which they erected in the street. The cycle is thus an unlikely vehicle of popular discontent. Hence the cycle was in a sense staged for the benefit of the wealthy, their friends and influential guests, and if the action had to be played towards the patron’s house and not down the narrow open street very few ordinary citizens would get a free view.

Possibly in response to the problems resulting from these circumstances, York developed its centralised systems of quality control in the later fifteenth century. In 1476 they appointed a committee of four experienced actors to audition actors and plays. And in the 1460s–1470s each company was required to submit its play for registration in the master-copy or Register which is our extant manuscript of the cycle. By 1501 at latest this manuscript was an instrument of control against which the Common Clerk or his Deputy checked the text as it was performed at the first station, the gate of Holy Trinity Priory. Behind all this, one suspects, lay a concern not just for standards of performance but also for standardised timing so that all 48
Chester's Mystery Cycle

plays could go round the 10–13 stations in the day without acting-business being expanded or lines adlibbed. Interestingly, the text never fully exerted that control. From the pages of the Register we hear the cry of the anguished administrator: ‘This matter of the gyrdlers agryth not with the Coucher in no poyn’. John Clerke, Deputy to the Common Clerk from 1535–1580, had caught the Girdlers and Nailers with an unregistered version of the ‘Massacre of the Innocents’! Similar notes by Clerke pepper the margins, while gaps beneath headings indicate that some companies never complied with the registration order; others evidently complied tardily. The Register evidences tension between some companies and ‘the centre’.

Chester, on the other hand, seeks to develop a less ambitious operation. The sacrament was carried from St. Mary’s on the Hill to St. John’s and the play seems to have been performed only at St. John’s, not elsewhere in the city as at York. Unfortunately, there is no reference to that play in records between 1471 and 1521, but when it does re-emerge in 1521, it is called ‘the Whitsun play’ and has been completely separated from Corpus Christi. A set of Pre-Reformation Banns, the verse-announcement of a performance, tell us that the play at St. John’s on Corpus Christi Day will be performed by the clergy (Pre-Reformation Banns, 156–63). By 1531 the occasion has been further expanded into a three-part production on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Whitsun week.

Subsequent records make it clear that the play is now fully processional but a more communal event than York’s and on a smaller scale, avoiding York’s organisational problems. An antiquarian, Robert Rogers, Rector of Gawsworth and Archdeacon of Chester, included a description of the plays among his notes which passed to his son David on his death in 1595. David copied these notes in at least five versions between 1609 and 1637. The route described began at the Abbey gate outside the cathedral where, according to David’s 1637 version in Liverpool University Library’s Special Collections, ‘the monks and Churche mighte haue the firste sight’. It then passed down the Northgate to the Cross in front of St. Peter’s Church where stood the Pentice, Chester’s town hall – ‘Before the mayor and Aldermen’, says David. The next station was somewhere in Watergate Street, and the pageants then passed through the lanes to the fourth and last station, in Bridge Street. Chester’s plays belonged to the clergy, to the
aldermen, and to all the citizens, not to an elitist group, and when the arrangements were varied in 1575 there is evidence of discontent that the plays did not tour the city as usual.43

THE GENRE OF THE CYCLE

Surprisingly, York’s play remained on Corpus Christi day even after suppression of the Feast in 1548.44 It was therefore difficult not to see the cycle as substituting in some way for the abandoned liturgy and continuing the traditional acknowledgement of the Catholic faith. It remained, as far as possible, an annual event with its own place in York’s calendar of civil celebration, distinct from more folksy activities such as the Yule Riding on the winter solstice of December 21 when, according to John Leland, ‘all manner of Whores, and Theives, Dice-Players, Carders, and all other unthrifty Folke’ were welcomed into the town by order of the sheriffs for twelve days following.45

Chester’s Whitsun Plays were performed only when the city agreed. Rogers describes the plays under the heading of ‘lawdable exersises yearelye vsed within the Cittie of Chester’ and follows his description immediately under the same heading with an account of the Midsummer Show, of which he says: ‘when the whitson playes were played. then the showe at midsomer wente not. And when the whitson playes were not played. then the midsomer showe wente onylxe.’46 It seems that the plays had to compete with the Show for the money and energies of the city and that there was a very close link between the two. The Show was a sort of carnival parade linked to the Abbot’s or Midsummer Fair. An order of 1564 for ‘furnytures’ requires ‘ffoure Ieans [giants], won vnicorne, won drombandarye [dromedary], won Luce, won Camell, won Asse, won dragon. sixoie hobby horses & sixtene naked boyes’,47 and Rogers speaks approvingly of its reformation under the Puritan mayor of 1600, Henry Hardware – ‘howsoever the vulgar [or baser sorte] of people did oppose themselues againste the reformation of sinnes not knoweinge that Antiane sinnes oughte to haue new Reformation’.48 In its procession went the devil from the Temptation, the comic ale-wife and attendant devil from the Harrowing of Hell, and Shepherds walking on stilts.49 When the Banns advertised Chester’s plays before the Reformation, it was the spectacular aspect of the
production, the lavish tableaux and rich hangings and elaborate scenic effects that were advertised. Moreover, a Chester tradition claimed that the Show was begun in 1498, during the period that the plays were moved from Corpus Christi to Whitsun, perhaps indicating some link. In short, the paradigm for the cycle at Chester became the annual mardi gras and when the plays were performed for the last time, in 1575, it was at Midsummer and the performance was defended as local tradition.

Equally, the cycle was not drama as sixteenth-century Cestrians understood it. They were now accustomed to almost annual epic spectacles on the Roodee; to performances of classical plays by the scholars of the free school; to visits from professional troupes. The Post-Reformation Banns urge the irrelevance of such sophisticated standards for assessing an outdated genre put on by working men for peasants:

By craftesmen and meane men these pageauntes are playde, and to commons and contry men accustomablye before.

Spectators are asked to note the peculiar method of staging the plays on waggons (56–60), the survival of old words which now have little meaning but had in the past good sense (49–55), and the dramatic crudity of allowing God to appear on stage in human form (196–202). Standards in drama have changed since the cycle was composed so long ago:

Of one thinge warne you now I shal: that not possible it is those matters to be contryved in such sorte and cunninge and by suche players of price as at this day good players and fine wittes coulde devise.

The cycle has been overtaken by time, superseded by genres better suited to the new Renaissance of artistic enlightenment.

AUTHORSHIP AND HISTORY

Now Cestrians become engrossed in the history of their city’s cycle, and emerge with a strange thesis. Rogers offers it in the (?)1619 version of his history thus:

In the yere when Sir John Arneway was mayor of Chester, the Whitson Playes made by a monke of Chester Abbay named Rondoll was by the
said maior published and caused to be sett forth and played at the charges of every company within the said citty with there pageintes . . . And the said Rondoll the author in the prologue before his booke of the Whitson Playes doth shew more fully.

The ‘prologue’ is in fact the Post-Reformation Banns which evidently were kept with the cycle-text and which disseminated this tradition of origins to the public. The people named here have long been identified.\textsuperscript{55} Rondoll is the monk Ranulf Higden who entered St. Werburgh’s Abbey in 1299 and died in 1364, the most eminent scholar the abbey produced. His fame rests particularly upon his universal history of the world, the \textit{Polychronicon}. Translated from Latin into English in 1385 and printed in translation by Caxton in 1482, it remained a highly influential work.\textsuperscript{56} Of course, Higden did not write the plays. His dates do not coincide with those of Chester’s reputed first mayor, Sir John Arneway, mentioned here, and no-one reading the \textit{Polychronicon} would deduce the content and structure of Chester’s extant cycle from it. Influence from it is channelled only from \textit{A Stanzaic Life of Christ}.\textsuperscript{57}

Yet the ascription recognises that the \textit{Polychronicon} and the cycle draw upon the same historiographical tradition, at once theocentric and chronologically comprehensive. Higden’s ordering of his work as the six ages of the world suggests the same sense of external direction and inevitability that we noted in the cycle. Both are digests of material – ‘this matter he abreviated’ (14), say the Banns. For both, individual incidents serve an exemplary function – to ‘parte of good belefe’ (27), say the Banns – and Higden asserts the edificatory power of non-scriptural wonders, found in both works. Moving closer, we recognise that both reach out to named authorities. Higden uses scriptural material – ‘not moncke-lyke in Scriptures’ (8), say the Banns; but also other authorised writers – ‘in stories traveled with the beste sorte’ (9). And Higden’s use of entertaining anecdotes translates into the cycle’s light relief – ‘some thynges not warranted by anye wrytte which glad the hartes’ (12–13). The innovatory creator of a monastic chronicle translates readily into the innovatory creator of the first English play-cycle.

But the Banns can also trace a latent Protestantism in Higden, giving his innovatory zeal a revolutionary edge:

These storyes of the testamente at this tyme, you knowe, in a common Englishe tonge never reade nor harde. Yet thereof in these pagiantes to make open showe
this moncke – and noe moncke – was nothinge affrayde with feare of burninge, hangeinge, or cuttinge of heade to sett out that all may deserne and see, and parte of good belefe, beleve ye mee. (21–27)

The threat of persecution here seems to spring from Higden’s disclaimer in Polychronicon that he takes shelter behind the statements of his authorities: ‘quos auctores in capite libri praescripsero, illis utar pro clypeo contra sugillantes’ [“Pe auctores Pat in the firste bygynnynge of Pis book I take for schelde and defens, me for to saue and schilde ayenst enemyes Pat me wolde despise strongly and blame”]. The rest is a deduction of the supposed function of the cycle which makes it compatible with sixteenth-century attitudes.

While much has been made of the absurdity of this claim, I feel that it reflects an attitude rather like that of Sidney towards Chaucer:

of whom, truly, I know not whether to marvel more, either that he in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this clear age walk so stumblingly after him. Yet had he great wants, fit to be forgiven in so reverent antiquity.

Advanced in his views, Higden is seen as nevertheless still trapped in his time. His Polychronicon, a Latin work for clerics, lacked the secular priorities of later histories written by laymen and was superseded during the sixteenth century. The biblical cycle, too, was an outmoded genre – revolutionary in its day in trying to bring the Bible in some form to the people, but no longer necessary. Higden’s achievement in his age has been superseded by the enlightenment of the sixteenth century, but it is to be commemorated as a measure of our progress. The staunchly protestant Rogers deprecates the plays, not out of hostility to their Catholicism, but because they belong to the time of our ignorance and it is now inappropriate to obscure the Holy Scriptures in this way. The historian is commemorated as a part of history himself.

Chester’s cycle remained acceptable as York’s did not because it conformed to what the sixteenth century imagined a medieval cycle should have been. Hence while in York it was mayors of Catholic sympathies – William Allen in 1572 and Robert Cripling in 1579 – who sought to revive the cycle, in Chester it was men of firm Protestant commitment – John Hanky in 1572 and Sir John Savage in 1575 – in whose mayoralities the plays received their last performances.
The attitude to the past seems to extend to the play-book itself. Rogers in 1619 writes as if the play-text was still available for consultation 44 years after the last performance. We certainly know it was available in Chester 32 years after the 1575 performance because that was when it was last copied. York’s text, on the other hand, was delivered to the Archbishop of York by the city in 1579 for correction and can next be traced from a note on one folio to the library of Henry Fairfax in 1695; only in 1844 was it identified as the York Register.

Moreover, Rogers talks as if he is dealing with a work of literature, a book written by a single author with a preface, very different from the patchwork collection of York. In fact, the cycle’s thematic and structural cohesiveness, as well as its unusual stanzaic regularity, make it very like a verse-narrative such as the Stanzaic Life of Christ and gives credence to the view that someone wrote it in a single impulse – or more probably reworked a less regular and ordered exemplar. I suspect that Rogers is offering a truth – that the play-book was preserved and revered as the only surviving vernacular work of Ranulf Higden, as an ancient text.

That at least would explain why it was copied five times between 1591 and 1607, so that we have more manuscripts of Chester’s cycle than of any other. And as we look at the copyists, it is clear that they are men of scholarly pretensions and Protestant adherents. Two were parish clerks and guild-scribes. The Ironmonger George Bellin, who copied the plays twice – in 1592 and 1600 – as well as producing a copy of the ‘Trial and Flagellation of Christ’ in 1599 which is still owned by the Chester Coopers who performed it, was clerk to Holy Trinity Church, Chester, and a clear handed scribe who worked for a number of the Chester companies. His commonplace-book reveals that he gave instruction to the children and servants of fellow-citizens and various documents in his hand indicate that he was also something of an antiquarian himself. William Bedford, copyist in 1604, was clerk to the Brewers, parish clerk at St. Peter’s Church and also did work for the Pentice. The 1607 copy was produced under the direction of James Miller, rector of St. Michael’s, Chester, precentor at the Cathedral and benefactor to St. Mary’s, whose will attests a considerable library including English works, chronicles and histories; he too gave instruction to local children and
his will is strongly Protestant in tone. And Edward Gregory, copyist in 1591, styles himself ‘scholar of Bunbury’; he was the son of a Beeston yeoman who inherited his father’s library, and he turns up as warden at the radically Puritan church at Bunbury.

These men clearly felt no conflict between their beliefs and their interest in the Whitsun Plays. Like the Rogers family and other antiquarians in Chester they probably valued the plays less for their content than as the product and mirror of the past in which a famous ‘historian’ had translated his version of biblical history for the benefit of the community.

CONCLUSION

What the citizens of Post-Reformation Chester found in their cycle was a comfortable reassurance of the superiority of the theology and art of present in comparison with the medieval past. Paradoxically, in the secular age of the later twentieth century when theatre-goers can no longer distinguish between scriptural and non-scriptural material, we see more clearly the underlying preconceptions of that approach and have begun again to evaluate the cycle as drama in its own right.

NOTES

1 This paper was originally delivered as an inaugural lecture at the University of Liverpool on 9 November, 1987, to mark the author’s appointment to a personal Chair in English Language and Literature.
3 e.g. A.W. Pollard, ed., English Miracle Plays, Moralities and Interludes: Specimens of the Pre-Elizabethan Drama (Oxford, 1890); J.M. Manly, ed., Specimens of the Pre-Shakspearean Drama. 2 vols. (Boston and New York, 1897–8).
4 O.B. Hardison, jr., Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages (Baltimore, 1965).
6 See the Foreword to J.S. Purvis, From Minster to Market Place (York, 1969).
9 Reviews of medieval play-productions are regularly featured in
Medieval English Theatre, Theatre Notebook, and Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama.


14 On this link, see particularly V.A. Kolve, *op. cit.*, chap. 3, pp. 33–56, ‘Corpus Christi Feast and the Impulse toward Cycle Form’.

15 Translated from the document transcribed in *REED York*, pp. 10–12: “les ditz pagentz sount mayntenez & sustenez par les Comunes & Artificers demesme la Citee en honour & reuurence nostreseignour Iesu Crist & honour & profitt de mesme la Citee.”


19 The distinction between ‘biblical’ and ‘legendary’ is probably a post-medieval perception. In the absence of an authorised literal vernacular translation of the Bible, material was disseminated in vernacular paraphrase which drew without differentiation upon apocryphal material and commentary as well as biblical material.


21 For a full account of this legend, see Ruth M. Keane, *The Theme of Kingship in the Chester Cycle* (unpublished MA thesis, University of Liverpool, 1977).

"The manner of these playes": the Chester Pageant Carriages and the Places where They Played', in David Mills, ed., Staging the Chester Cycle, pp. 17-48.

23 On payments, see Peter Meredith, "Make the asse to speake" or Staging the Chester Plays,' in David Mills, ed., Staging the Chester Cycle, pp. 53-4 and 71-6.

24 "freere Bartholemewe" is the ascription in the Stanzaic Life of Christ, which in turn derives it from the Legenda Aurea. The individual has not been conclusively identified, though a reference to the lost apocryphal gospel of St. Bartholomew has been postulated.

25 Guide-books existed for pilgrims to Rome. A notable example, the Mirabilia Urbs Romae, seems to have influenced the Chester account. See further, Keane, op. cit.


28 cf. L.M. Clopper, ‘Tyrrants and Villains: Characterization in the Passion Sequences of the English Cycle Plays', Modern Language Quarterly, 41 (1980), p. 10: “One particular virtue of the York cycle is that it shows an acute awareness of political maneuverings; it stresses the insecurities of the men in power and ridicules their sense of power and the assumption that they control the situation.” For a Marxist reading of the potential of the cycles for social comment, see Walter Cohen, Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 72-3: “The dual nature of Christ facilitated the critique of social hierarchy.”

29 REED York, p. 3, lines 20-21; REED Chester, pp. 6-7.


31 A point made by Eileen White, York Mystery Play, p. 22.


34 REED York, p. 187 (1501): “Et de firma primi loci dimittitur Willelmo Catterton & alij vs locum Communis Clerici – iijs xjd”; see also p. 263 (1539): “In primis the ffyrst place at Trenytie yaito where as the Comon Clerke ke pys the Registre wherefore that place goith free.”


36 See facsimile-edition introduction, sections A and I.

38 REED Chester, pp. 24-5; Lumiansky & Mills, Essays, pp. 210-12.
39 Quotations from and reference to the Banns throughout are from the edited texts given in Lumiansky & Mills, Essays, pp. 272-310.
40 REED Chester, pp. 27-28; Lumiansky & Mills, Essays, pp. 214-16.
42 REED Chester, pp. 433–36.
43 “The whitson playes played in pageantes in this cittye at midsomer to the great dislike of many because the playe was in on part of the Citty”, Chester Mayors’ List 5, quoted from REED Chester, p. 110.
46 Quoted from the 1609 version of the Breviary, REED Chester, p. 252.
47 BL Harley 2150, f. 208, in REED Chester, pp. 71–2.
48 Clopper, REED Chester, p. 252.
49 Ibid., p. lii.
50 cf. the description of the Mercers’ waggon for their play of Christ’s Presentation in the Temple:

   The Mercers worshipfull of degre, 
   the Presentation, that have yee; 
   hit falleth best for your see 
   by right reason and skyle. 
   Of cariage I have no doubt: 
   both within and also without 
   it shall be deckyd that all the rowte 
   full gladly on it shall be to loke. 
   With sondry cullors it shall shine 
   of velvit, satten, and damaske fyne, 
   taffyta, sersnett of poppynggee grene. 
   (61–71)

51 See REED Chester, pp. 21, 22 and 473 for documents, and p. xliii for interpretation.
52 “acording to the auncyent and lawdable custom of the saide citie”, Lumiansky & Mills, Essays, pp. 221–3; REED Chester, pp. 113–7.
53 The last recorded sixteenth-century performance of a cycle-play in Chester seems to have been part of a ‘festival of Chester drama’ provided by the mayor, Thomas Bellin, for the Earl of Derby and his son in 1577: “Alsoe he entertauned . the Earle of Darbie and his sonne fordinando . Lord Strange, two nightes at his howse he caused the Sheappeardes playe to be played at the hie Crosse / with other Triumphes on the Roode Deey”, to which the antiquarian Randle Holmes III adds in the margin: “the scollers of the freescole also playd a comody before them at mr maiors hows” (REED Chester, p. 124). Here the street-play stands beside an epic spectacle (a ‘triumph’) and what was evidently a classical play for an intimate
indoors. Visits by named professional troupes are recorded only after the period of the cycle, although an undated entry in St. Werburgh’s accounts refers to “diuersis Nuncijs et histrionibus tam domini Regis quam aliorum magnatum” (REED Chester, p. 472), and the “Enterlude named kinge Roberte of Scissill was playd at the highe Crosse in Chester” in 1529–30 (REED Chester, p. 26).

54 Quoted from ff. 112v.–113 of Chester Record Office MS DCC 19, as transcribed in Lumiansky & Mills, Essays, p. 268; see also, REED Chester, p. 326. The manuscript is dated on internal evidence by Clopper as “after 1619 but probably could not have been made much after 1623” (REED Chester, p. xxxi).


58 Polychronicon, vol. 1, pp. 20 (Latin) and 21 (Trevisa).


60 Lumiansky & Mills, Essays, p. 264: “As also the beinge nothinge profitable to anye use, excepte it be to showe the ignorance of ooure forefathers and to make us, theire offspringe, unexcousable before God, that have the true and sincere words of the Gospell of ooure Lord and savioure Jesus Christe, if we apprehende not the same in ooure liffe and practise to the eternall glorie of ooure God, the salvation and conforte of ooure owne soles.”


64 On the scribes and their characteristic practices, see also Lumiansky & Mills, Essays, pp. 57–76.