The civic drama of old Kilkenny

The prospect that the lost Corpus Christi plays of Kilkenny may one day turn up in some highly unlikely place is the sort of happy dream that Irish serendipity over the last few years tends to keep alive. When a holograph manuscript of a lost Haydn Mass can appear in a County Antrim farmer’s attic, or when treasure hunters unearth a companion piece to the Ardagh chalice in a peat bog in County Tipperary, it would not seem too much to imagine that somewhere fate may also have spared the Kilkenny playbook. In fact in 1637 at least two such playbooks were in existence to take their chances through time; one came to Dublin and the other, presumably, stayed in Kilkenny. The likely places in both these cities have now been searched out, and the unlikely places, by their nature, can never be. But though no actual plays have as yet come to light, a picture has nevertheless started to emerge from the kind of source material familiar to REED editors of what the civic drama of old Kilkenny was like. In this article I will try to describe that picture as I see it.

By the later sixteenth century, the two main occasions when Kilkenny supported a civic drama were Corpus Christi and Midsummer. Indeed, Kilkenny is the only place in Ireland where a Corpus Christi drama is known for certain to have been produced, for although there may be some indication of such drama in Dublin too, its production there is far less clearcut a matter. It is not hard to see why Kilkenny should have developed a dramatic tradition around Corpus Christi; difficulty lies rather in seeing why other Irish cities of greater size and resource did not do so equally. Perhaps the old problem of record survival is much to blame for having obscured the picture. Ireland’s document losses over the years have certainly been heavy. Or perhaps it may really be that with the possible exception of Dublin, some unique confluence of historical circumstances set Kilkenny apart in this respect. At any rate, several circumstances were right to encourage drama there generally. In the first place, Kilkenny had a long history of urban settlement. A church of St Cainnech (or in Irish a cill Chainnig, from which the modern placename derives) had been established there long before the Anglo-Normans invaded in the 1170s, and after the invasion, the native Celts found themselves not so much expelled as assimilated to or accommodated near the society of the newcomers. Conspicuous amongst the signs of an amicable Hiberno-Norman symbiosis was the creation of an Irishtown with its own administrative system. It was located a little to the east of the city walls (these were built in the first half of the thirteenth century) and around the substantial thirteenth-century cathedral that had been raised over an earlier Hiberno-Romanesque church of St. Cainnech. The Irishtown was in effect an acknowledgment of an earlier Celtic status quo now brought within the pale of an Anglo-Norman administration. Indeed by 1366, alarm at the rapid acculturation of the Anglo-Norman lords to an Irish life-style issued in the Statute of Kilkenny which, amongst other things, tried to restrain Irish minstrels 'cestascavoir Typanours, sferdanes, skelaghys, Bablers, Rymors, clercz ne nullez autres minstrells Irois' from coming amongst the English. The Statute, the Anglo-Normans' belated reaction to the unforeseen consequences of their tolerance, was directed here against entertainers and minstrels from a native Gaelic tradition, not against any ones that may have come over from England at the time of the invasion in Anglo-Norman entourages. In fact there is clear evidence that Ireland had a highly organized travelling minstrel class from well before the Anglo-Normans came. Judging by the Statute, these minstrels were successfully competing for English patronage. Moreover, in some contexts the activity of its members could be fairly described as having been ‘dramatic’ in the rather narrow
sense which is now normally understood by that word. It is likely that any entertainments introduced into Kilkenny by native Gaelic minstrels would have been compounded with entertainments imported by the Anglo-Norman settlers, and as in so many other areas, so too in the area of entertainment there would no doubt have been a lively exchange of skills and expertise.

Kilkenny also soon became a home for those traditional patrons of sanitized forms of entertainment, the friars. They settled in Kilkenny early on and by the end of the thirteenth century were flourishing there. In the early fourteenth century Richard Ledrede, Franciscan bishop of Ossory, proved a true son of his order when he devised pious Latin alternatives to the 'cantilenis teatralibus, turpibus et secularibus' with which clerics of his cathedral might be tempted to 'pollute their throats and mouths'. Whether or not the friars ever sponsored religious drama in Kilkenny is not known, but they are not likely to have been opposed to any steps taken in that direction. As well as the high profile of the mendicant orders, and the cultural implications of that, Kilkenny was becoming a noteworthy centre by virtue of royal visitations and the parliaments and synods held there. For example, when Richard II visited Kilkenny Castle in the 1390s, now the home of James Butler, third Earl of Ormond, the occasion would presumably not have passed without festivity of any kind. It is interesting to note, incidentally, that despite the measures of the 1366 Statute to stem gaelicization, the third Earl was a fluent Irish speaker. The political power of the house of Ormond, though eclipse during the mid-fifteenth century, shone out once more on the accession of Henry VII, for the Butlers had customarily supported the Lancastrian cause. From the late fifteenth century on, Kilkenny started to recover lost ground, and by the later sixteenth century, the royal favour it had come to enjoy was to safeguard it against the worst effects of the depredations following in the wake of Elizabeth I's reconquest of Ireland. The period covered by the dramatic records discussed below was, then, an affluent one in Kilkenny history.

It is only from the year 1580 onwards that records survive detailed enough to give a good impression of what the civic drama of Kilkenny may have been like. An access limited to the last years of its existence is necessarily a drawback, but one partly compensated for by the fact that since those years were prosperous, the civic drama which they harboured must have benefitted from their prosperity to some extent. Of the two main occasions for civic drama, Midsummer and Corpus Christi, the records for Corpus Christi are the fuller, and it seems appropriate to dwell upon them. By the year 1500, the general observance of the Corpus Christi feast in Kilkenny was sufficiently large to make the Corporation legislate for its proper ordering. From 11:00 p.m. on Corpus Christi to 11:00 p.m. on Friday the next day, freedom of coming and going was allowed to the populace, and this presumably extended to the visitors who came in for the feast and fair. The first clear evidence of some sort of Corpus Christi drama does not appear till 1556. Yet when it does it appears only incidentally and in a curious context: Richard Cody, the town treasurer of Cashel, was able to steal back the body of Cashel's former Archbishop, Edmund Butler, from its resting place in St Canice's Cathedral because the townsfolk were too absorbed watching the Corpus Christi play to notice the theft going on. It seems quite likely, then, that when John Bale, who had been summoned to the bishopric of Ossory in 1553, marked the accession of a Catholic queen in the same year with two of his rabidly Protestant plays, he was at least not doing anything newfangled by presenting drama in the Kilkenny streets. More probably he was infiltrating a tradition that was already in place rather than inaugurating a new one. His fifth-column use of drama was not appreciated, however, and neither was he; his servants were killed, and he narrowly escaped the clutches of a mob himself.

Whether at any earlier stage in its history the Kilkenny Corpus Christi play may have been produced and organized by the trades guilds is not known. If it ever were,
by 1580 the axis of responsibility had radically shifted, for what is insistently clear is that by this date the civic drama was centred upon Kilkenny Corporation. The Corporation in turn largely drew its membership from an established Kilkenny merchant oligarchy, and it seems clear that the civic drama, as well as serving the standard turns of entertainment and edification, would have been a handy social manoeuvre for conflating civic prestige with that of the ruling families. Today the holdings in the city archives are a dim reflection of their former extent, and were it not for the antiquarian interests they attracted in the nineteenth century, the picture of any civic drama at all would have been very sketchy indeed.

Only very recently has anything seriously been done about conserving the archives, and within living memory, archival material was kept at the Tholsel in random and dishevelled heaps. Nevertheless, a complete search of the archives has revealed two new documents, printed in Appendix I below, which together with the nineteenth-century antiquarian transcriptions shed further light on the organization, staging and content of the play.

It looks as if the civic drama, whether on Corpus Christi or Midsummer, was intended to be presented annually, at least by the 1580s. Only from 1610 does a record survive of a formal decree by the Mayor and aldermen that Corpus Christi that year should be celebrated 'in decent and solemn manner as usual', yet this unique survival can hardly witness to a once-off decree; similar decrees, the records of which have not come down to us, were no doubt also made in other years. Whatever the exact terms of the 1610 decree, they were formulated according to advice received from the Council. It seems that one individual may have been made chiefly responsible for producing the actual play, and that ultimately the Corporation would shoulder all the expenditures he incurred in its production as well as allocate some reward to him for his efforts. How the producer selected his cast is not clear, though there are signs that he may have automatically inherited some of them, people who had become, as it were, traditional parts of the play's furniture. On the other hand, it may have been equally traditional to choose young men for many of the parts. Not every last detail of expenditure, either directly or indirectly connected with the play, was accounted for by the producer himself. For example, when in 1637 Mary Rothe prepared a breakfast for the young men who acted in the Corpus Christi play, her reimbursement for 20s sterling was ordered by Mayor James Cowley and Thomas Archer. The chit they signed, dated 8th June, 1637, acted as a warrant to the receiver of the Corporation revenues, William Shee, for Mary Rothe's payment, and a corresponding record survives, dated the very same day, in which William Shee notes that she has been paid. The play producer, however he may have been in 1637, seems to have been by-passed by this procedure, and no doubt in other respects he was freed from personally having to settle every single play expense on the Corporation's behalf. The Corporation was evidently being dealt with directly by several people, and in Mary Rothe's case, she wasted no time in claiming her money. The standard procedure was evidently to issue the payee with an endorsed chit which he or she would then present to the official designated to make the payment. When the sum had been paid out, the official would make a note of it.

The Corpus Christi play was usually staged about half way down High Street around the medieval Market Cross and near to the Corporation offices at the Tholsel (see fig 1). It appears to have been a stationary, place-and-scaffold type of production with players acting from one or more fixed stages. A record of the 13th April, 1632 implies the erection of what was probably some sort of stage to the south side of the Market Cross: 'The north side of the market cross granted to two persons for shops during the fair time of Corpus Christi, in regard their shops are stopt up by the stations and play of Corpus Christi day'. The Market Cross itself in the centre of the street may have provided another convenient scaffold location, were the play to require multiple locations. Seating may also have been put in place, as the decree of the 20th April,
1610 perhaps suggests: carpenters were employed 'to make rails for keeping out horses and the mob, and for placing strangers at the place where the interlude shall be plaid'.

Possibly the rails to keep out the horses and mob were temporary barriers set up for the duration of the play and erected across either end of the High Street (see fig 2). Excellent views of the play from the upper storeys of the town houses flanking High Street, and no doubt of the Tholsel itself, would also have been available to a privileged few.

Actors could have had access to the playing area from either end of the High Street, but during a performance this may have meant negotiating a way through a crowd. More convenient for such entrance and exits would have been the narrow passageway known today as the Butter Slip, which opens into High Street exactly in front of the spot where the Market Cross originally stood, for although the Butter Slip is not known for certain to have been in such a way, it would have been ideally placed for this purpose and could have been kept free of spectators quite easily.

If the Corpus Christi play was performed mainly in one locale, as the records suggest, there seems also to have been some sort of mobile performance which was presented either before or after the play proper and which 'went in stations'. Some sort of differentiation between the stations and the play is possibly implied in the record of the 13th April, 1632 quoted above. The stations are mentioned in the earliest of the extant records, and already they are being spoken of as if they are a traditional feature of the Corpus Christi celebrations. One Richard Nogell was paid 8d sterling on 6th June, 1589 for 'placing the Stacions on Corpus Christi Daye last past according to the conclusion of the Counsell and the custome of the Town'. The fact that the stations could be 'placed' suggests that they were physically marked out in some way, though whether with a scaffold stage or with something less substantial is not known. The expression 'to go in stations' seems to suggest that characters who did so moved between one station and the next, no doubt in some pre-determined sequence. Moreover, at least one of these stations, in the record of the 13th April, 1632 noted above, was close to the place in the High Street where the play was played. Most probably, then, the stations were identifiable locales arranged along some street route and which functioned as halting places where appointed characters would display themselves before moving on. A good illustration of the likely distinction between play and stations is to be found in a chit dated the 18th June, 1590:

Robert Archer town balife, you may not faile to pay unto St. Micchel & the Devill, that played the resurrection on Corpus Christi Day, the sum of Six Shillings Stg. and to the other Devill & Criste that went in Stacions eighteen pence, and to Michell that went in Stacions 9d Stg. for which this shall be yo'. warrant, Dated the 18th of June 1590. You shall also pay to John hoyle for a Piece of Tymber for mending the Ducking Stole 15d Stg. and to Daniell Kupp for making the same, and mending the Castelle Gate two Shillings Sterg. Total 11s 7d

Thomas Langton Souvraine.

Payment for acting in the play is substantially more than for 'going in stations'; St Michael and the Devil received 6s sterling for acting, while the 'other Devill' and Christ who 'went in Stacions' got 18d, and Michael (St Michael again?) got 9d sterling. If, presumably, payment was commensurate with effort, it looks as if whatever occurred at a station was a much less elaborate business than acting in the play itself. Any self-display at a station would seem to have been comparatively limited; perhaps characters confined themselves to delivering a few lines, accompanying them with some suitable action and gestures.
It looks as if there was a Corpus Christi procession of some kind – there are several mentions of payments to individuals for ‘riding’ on Corpus Christi – though by the 1580s it is not likely that the Host would have been carried about in it. Although at this date Protestant sensibilities in Ireland were somewhat skin-deep, even inside the Anglicized walled towns the official religious position could hardly have brooked so ostentatious a public parade commemorating the old unreformed theology. Perhaps the procession had become largely a secular affair, a less provocative descendant of some pre-Reformation ancestor. It is not clear when on the day the procession occurred, though in all likelihood it would have taken place before rather than after the play. Nor is the processional route known, though it would seem appropriate for it to have followed the route in which the stations had been placed, for some of its course at least.

Much of the play content is ascertainable. On 9th June, 1585, one James Krininge, clerk, received 20s sterling ‘for setting forth of the Mariés’ and 16d sterling ‘for Six paires of Gloves for Criste, John Evangeliste, Mary Mother, and the other three Mariyes’. It is not absolutely clear that this payment is for the Corpus Christi play rather than one at Midsummer (although Corpus Christi in 1585 fell the very next day, on 10th June). However, there sometimes appears to have been considerable overlap in the content of the Corpus Christi and Midsummer plays, so the lack of certainty here becomes less problematic. If anything it is the placing of the stations on Corpus Christi that seems to distinguish that feast from Midsummer. There is another warrant for a payment of a mark sterling to one John Busher which is dated a few days earlier, on 3rd June, 1585. Busher is also being paid for ‘setting forth of the Mariés’, and he receives an additional 16d sterling, this time for eight pairs of gloves. Gloves evidently cost 2d sterling a pair in 1585, as they did in the warrant of 9th June, but here eight pairs are mentioned, presumably implying at least eight characters in the play of the ‘Mariés’. Three years later, in 1588, John Busher appears again. Two payments were ordered to him, and though both name the play differently, both seem to refer to the same play. Busher was again responsible for putting on the ‘Mariés’, as one warrant calls it, and as another calls it, the play of the Resurrection. In 1588 the occasion is clear. This time it is not Corpus Christi but Midsummer, and we are told that the play had a sepulchre (7d was paid for ‘tweo perelles’ for it) and that it was acted ‘in St Mary’s Church’. The warrant of 18th June, 1590, printed above, adds the characters of St Michael and the devil to the cast list for the play of the Resurrection, which in this year is being presented on Corpus Christi.

It seems clear from all this that the Kilkenny Corpus Christi play (and the Midsummer play too) was essentially a Passion play which included episodes on the Crucifixion, the Harrowing of Hell and the Resurrection. It is interesting to note that the Passion may have loomed large in the religious consciousness of Kilkenny townsfolk, for the play’s subject-matter would have paralleled the recurrent emphasis on Passion imagery in art, particularly the art of tomb sculpture, that characterizes this part of Ireland at this date. However, the Passion play was not necessarily the only dramatic presentation on either Corpus Christi or Midsummer; evidently a pageant of the Nine Worthies was also very popular, and the first extant mention of it dates to 1593 when one Thomas Lucas, who also ‘set forth’ the Mariés on Corpus Christi in that year, was paid 6s 8d ‘for half a Conquerer’s Wadge’ and 3s 4d sterling ‘for his paynes for rendering the part Charlemayne’. The warrant, dated to the 18th and 19th June, 1593 does not reveal whether his performance in the Nine Worthies pageant took place on Corpus Christi (on 14th June in that year), or whether it was forthcoming on Midsummer. However, it is clear from seven warrants of 1637 that both Passion play and Nine Worthies pageant might coincide on the same day. A payment of 6s 8d sterling was ordered on 4th June, 1637 to one Thomas Daniel in exchange for the wings, coronet and banner of St Michael in the Corpus Christi play, and this, along with Mary Rothe’s payment for her breakfast given to the Corpus Christi play actors in the same year, as well as a payment for the
play's musicians, establishes that 1637 saw a Corpus Christi play performance. There must also have been a pageant of the Nine Worthies sometime on the same day. John Purcell, Matthew Hickey, William Lawless and James Barry were all paid various amounts in 1637 for acting in it. Indeed, Matthew Hickey and William Lawless doubled parts; Hickey played two Conquerors, and Lawless both Godfrey and Hector. The Worthies pageant may have been presented in the playing area used for the Corpus Christi play, presumably with some interval between the two different performances, or it may have gone in stations, or even both; there is no information on the matter. By the sixteenth century, Kilkenny was doing its share in making the Nine Worthies known in Ireland. Dublin had an annual Corpus Christi pageant of the Worthies already by 1498 (the pageant had probably been going on there for several years before that). On the west side of the country, too, a sixteenth-century Limerick gentleman is found noting down the names of the Worthies in his diary.

One of the most important sources of information on the nature of the civic drama of old Kilkenny is to be found in the very names which the records contain, and which are printed in Appendix ii below. Sorting out and identifying them can be a complicated business, and one best left to another study. It may eventually prove possible to discover much useful information about the circumstances of these people, such as what their family connections were, their occupations, where they lived or held property in Kilkenny and even their approximate age at the time of a record entry. In the interim, however, it is worth noting some of the broader implications of these names for our understanding of the social context of the Kilkenny plays. Very noticeable is the fact that many of these people, sometimes the actors but more particularly those involved at the financial end who signed payment chits or who functioned in some official administrative capacity, belonged to the old established Kilkenny families: the names Archdekin, Archer, Cowley, Langton, Lawless, Ragget, Rothe and Shee all appear. This signals more than that, as one might expect, the members of the Corporation were mainly recruited amongst the prominent citizens; that is certainly true, but it is also true that the Corporation, via its constituent families, was deeply committed to the plays. A play performance in St Mary's church is also suggestive in this respect, for St Mary's was a burial place for the Archers, Rothes and Shees, the families whose names, incidentally, occur with the most frequency in the list printed in Appendix ii. Those who actually performed in the plays are more difficult to trace, sometimes even when their surnames suggest their connection with the ruling families. John and Philip Lawless fall into this category. They were brothers who variously acted on Corpus Christi and Midsummer between the years 1600 and 1603. Perhaps this hints at a tendency to involve particular families at the acting end of the production. Productions seem also to have had some clerical input. William Kelly, for example, who acted St Michael on an occasion in 1602, may well be the same 'William Kelly of Kilkenny, clerk' who is mentioned in a deed of 28th February, 1601. Similarly one James Krininge, who produced the 'Maries' in 1585, signed his name and his profession as 'Clark' on the warrant for his payment, in acknowledgment of its receipt. Finally, by the 1630s, mention is being made of children being instructed to participate in the Corpus Christi play, and there may be some support for this in the list of personnel printed in Appendix ii: if John Purcell, actor of a Conqueror at Corpus Christi and Midsummer in 1637, is the same John Purcell whose father, Richard, died at 1635, he was only twelve years old when he played the part.

More work remains to be done on the documents, especially in this area of named personnel, and it will be interesting to see whether the preliminary outline drawn here will need to be altered much in the light of it. Whether or not the picture alters radically remains to be seen, but one thing can be confidently predicted. Old Kilkenny, possibly the last centre for Corpus Christi plays in the British Isles, will add uniquely to the sum of information that reed research has made and continues to make available. The
complexion of the civic drama there will illustrate not only within Ireland, but once again within the British Isles generally, how diverse the pattern of dramatic activity was before the lean years of the Commonwealth.

NOTES

1 See P. Watters, "Notes of Particulars extracted from the Kilkenny Corporation Records relating to the Miracle Plays as performed there from the year 1580 to the year 1639", Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland, 4th Series, 6(1883–84), 238–42; see 241.

2 With the exception of certain uncatalogued holdings in the National Library and the City Hall, Dublin, which still remain unchartered territory.

3 Evidence to suggest a Dublin Corpus Christi play, as opposed to a mere tableau vivant pageant, is slender but interesting nonetheless. Antiquarian transcriptions of parts of the Dublin Tailors' Book of Accounts, for example, note sixteenth-century payments for 'playing' on Corpus Christi day. The payments perhaps suggest something more than just a motionless pageant. (The documents will be printed in the forthcoming REED: Ireland volume.)

4 A particularly heavy loss of records was sustained in the civil unrest of 1922, when the Four Courts, an important archive that was currently doubling as a munitions dump, was shelled. The consequences for the manuscripts were of course disastrous, and antiquarian transcriptions made before the incident are now of singular importance.

5 The town was well established before the Anglo-Normans arrived. Its Anglo-Norman phase was ushered in by the first lord of Leinster. See A. Cosgrove (ed), A New History of Ireland II: Medieval Ireland 1169–1534 (Oxford, 1987), 166.


7 'That is to say, players of the tìmpán [a variety of harp], poets, story-tellers, babblers, rymers, clerks nor any other Irish minstrel.' See H.F. Berry (ed) Statutes and Ordinances, and Acts of the Parliament of Ireland, King John to Henry v (Dublin, 1907), 446, for the text of the Statute. The fact that the first three types of minstrel are referred to by Anglicized forms of Gaelic words (their classical Irish forms, in the nominative singular, would be respectively tìmpinach, fer dàna and scelaige) may perhaps betray the extent of their success in attracting English audiences.

8 There are few extensive studies of the Gaelic entertainer, but notable amongst them is A. Harrison, An Chrosántacht (Dublin, 1979). This book is shortly to be issued in English. Harrison presents the crosán (a buffoon, satirist) as a variety of actor who practiced characteristic forms of entertainment. Some of the evidence for the native Gaelic minstrel tradition will be included in REED: Ireland in preparation.

9 As might be expected, the Dominicans and Franciscans were in the vanguard; the Dominicans had established a Kilkenny house in 1225 and the Franciscans one between 1232 and 1240. The other two main mendicant orders never got a foothold. See J.A. Watt, The Church in Medieval Ireland (Dublin, 1972), 60–84, for an account of the early spread of the Dominicans and Franciscans in Kilkenny and Ireland generally.

10 A note on fol 70 of The Red Book of Ossory tells the reader that Bishop Ledrede devised the songs (cantilene) in the Book, 'ne guttura eorum [ie, of his clerics] et ora Deo sanctificata pollutur cantilenis teatralibus, turpibus et secularibus.' The note is printed in the calendar of the Book prepared by J.T. Gilbert in the Historical Manuscripts Commission (London, 1885–87), 10th Report, Appendix, part V, 242. (Recent work by Joan Rimmer on the Latin songs is suggesting that many of them were dance measures,
devised with dancing specifically in mind. I am obliged to her for her information on this. It is also not certain how many of the songs were actually composed by the bishop; A.G. Rigg, 'The Red Book of Ossory', ME 46 (1977), 269–78, has shown that some of them were certainly the work of the earlier Franciscan poet Walter of Wimborne; see also his 'Walter of Wimborne, O.F.M.: An Anglo-Latin Poet of the Thirteenth Century,' MS 33 (1971), 371–78.

11 The role of the friars in promoting drama has been stressed by D.L. Jeffrey, 'Franciscan Spirituality and the Rise of the Early English Drama,' Mosaic 8 (1975), 17–46.

12 If, as an early fifteenth-century Franciscan sermon puts it, 'good mynstralcye' is one of the four things needful when offering a friend hospitality (Bodleian Library MS Lat. th. d. 1, fol 173), the visit of a king would seem to demand it when the means are there for its provision. It is not until the early seventeenth century, however, that records survive of the Earls of Ormond retaining minstrels (see P. Watters, 'Notes of Entries in the Corporation Records, Kilkenny, relative to a Visit of Lord Viscount Wentworth to Kilkenny in the year 1637,' Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland, 4th Series, 6 (1883–84), 242–49; see 243.

13 The tenth Earl of Ormond, Tomás Dubh ('Black Thomas') as he was known, was an especial favourite of Elizabeth I. By all accounts a handsome man, he also had the advantage of an education with Edward VI at the English court, and was a cousin of the Boleyns. On the economic security of Kilkenny during Elizabeth I's reign, see E. Curtis (ed.), Calendar of Ormond Deeds (Dublin, 1943) vi, iii–iv.


17 Early evidence for Kilkenny guilds appears in the Liber Primus, for example, where a controversy between the guilds of Glovers and Shoemakers is mentioned in 1514 (see McNell, Liber Primus, 135), but there is no early evidence whatsoever for any participation by the guilds in the organization of civic pageantry. By the seventeenth century, it appears that guilds may have been entering extravagantly into the spirit of things on Corpus Christi, for a memorandum in the Red Book of Kilkenny Corporation (on which, see note 19 below) for 23rd January, 1628, legislates as follows: 'The masters of companies usually running in debt on account of the feasts they annually gave the freemen on Corpus Christi day, and being ruined thereby, the said feasts are abolished.' (See J.G.A. Prim, 'Ancient Civic Enactments for Restraining Gossiping and Feasting,' Transactions of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society 1 (1849–51), 436–41; see 439.) Nevertheless, if by this date the guilds were corporately involved in the civic drama, the records of it have not survived.

18 Many members of the prominent Kilkenny families were merchants. Nicholas Langton, for example, was a merchant by trade (see Appendix n below). He was one of the townsmsen sent to London to negotiate the 1609 Charter which raised Kilkenny to city status. On the prominent families, see also note 58 below.

19 Although, ironically enough, the antiquarians may be partly to blame for the misplacing of some of the documents. A forlorn appeal went out in the mid-nineteenth century for Corporation documents loaned out in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and unreturned: 'and I trust that any other gentleman in whose family such documents may have been handed down from ancestors who were members of the old corporation, will, upon reading this enquiry concerning them, afford all possible information on the subject' (J.G.A. Prim, 'Missing Records. No. II. Muniments of the Corporation of Kilkenny,' Transactions of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society 1 (1849–51), 427–32;
see 431 for this quotation). It produced no results. A major loss from our point of view was the *Red Book* of Kilkenny Corporation, already lost by the mid-nineteenth century, whose entries began in Elizabeth I's reign. An antiquarian summary of its contents, made by the Kilkenny alderman William Colles in the mid-eighteenth century, was available to Prim, and from it he printed some important extracts in his article, 'Olden Popular Pastimes in Kilkenny,' *Transactions of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society* 2(1852–53), 319–35. My attempts to trace the summary have not yet succeeded.

I am greatly obliged to Peter Farrelly, former Town Clerk of Kilkenny, for helpful discussion on the recent state of the Corporation archives.

Judging by the discovery of the documents printed in Appendix I below, it would appear that Watters' excerpting of the Corporation records (Watters, 'Notes of Particulars,' 238–42), was very selective. Bearing this in mind, it looks as if the plays, and certainly the civic celebrations which were their context, may have been an annual event by the 1580s. It is also interesting to note that in his 1603 petition, printed in Appendix I, William Coursey speaks in terms which imply annual play performances.

This was the person normally referred to as 'setting forth' (once as 'setting out of') the play. (A similar collocation, 'to set forth publike playes and games,' is given in the *OED* for 1613 – see *Set forth*, sub-sense (c) – and its meaning interpreted as 'to furnish, provide (entertainment).') Five people are so styled: James Krininge in 1585, John Busher also in 1585 and again in 1588, Thomas Lucas in 1593, William Coursey in 1602 and 1603, and John Kennedy also in 1603. These facts admit various interpretations, though I believe one has more to recommend it than any other. If one individual was the sole 'setter forth' of a production, then in 1585 and 1603, when two 'setters forth' are mentioned, one must have been responsible for that year's Corpus Christi production and the other for the Midsummer production, because it is most unlikely that the same play would have been acted by two different casts on the same occasion. A second interpretation, that two 'setters forth' had combined to produce the same play, is also possible, but less plausible, because if they had, then in the 1585, each character would have received two pairs of gloves for acting in the same production, and this seems doubtful.

Note the case of John Lawless in Appendix II, for example, who performed in various years.

Note William Coursey's annual stipend voted in 1631 for instructing the children for the Corpus Christi play in Appendix II. What the children did, exactly, is not clear, but it is quite possible they performed. Note also Mary Rothe's breakfast for the 'Young Men' who acted in the Corpus Christi play in 1637 in Appendix II.

Watters, 'Notes of Particulars,' 241.

William Coursey also submitted the petition of 1603; once again if this is the same man, or even if it is the father of the 1631 and 1637 William Coursey, it similarly suggests a longstanding family involvement with play production. The William Coursey who is paid for acting in 1584, unless he were a child at the time, could not be the William Coursey of 1631.

Sometimes the payee would also sign the warrant to acknowledge receipt of payment (see Watters, 'Notes of Particulars,' 238, where James Krininge acknowledges his receipt this way; also similarly Adam Shee in Appendix I below). National Library of Ireland ms D.3302, a chance survival of a quire from a Kilkenny Corporation account book, shows John Mony, Kilkenny Town Bailiff in 1600, in action entering the note of his disbursement into his ledger after being presented with a warrant (see National Library of Ireland ms D.3302, fols 3v–4). The warrant which ordered payment, no longer
traceable, was that available to Watters, 'Notes of Particulars,' 239.


30 It is well known that such architectural features were sometimes incorporated into plays or pageants (see on this, for example, G. Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300–1660*, 2nd ed (London and New York, 1980), I, 55–58), and quite possibly the Kilkenny Market Cross was similarly used. When Bale presented his polemical dramas in 1553 'at the market crosse,' it sounds as if the Cross may be being so used, although his preposition 'at' is vague enough also to mean 'around' or 'nearby'.

31 My italics; Prim, 'Olden Popular Pastimes,' 327.

32 The High Street town houses were mainly owned by the same merchant families who dominated the Corporation. Some of these mansions (those of the Archers, Langtons, Rothes and Shees) still survive to greater or lesser extents. The Market Cross, however, put in place in 1335, was taken down by the Corporation in 1771.

33 The passageway between High Street and modern St Kieran's Street (this street was known c 1600 as Low Lane) and which today is called the Butter Slip, was probably in existence before 1602. In this year Nicholas Langton (possibly the same man who subscribes to a payment to John Kennedy on 20th June, 1603 in Appendix II below) was granted permission by the Corporation to build a town house in the High Street on the south side of the Market Cross, provided he leave open a public access between the High Street and Low Lane. The Butter Slip conforms exactly to the measurements laid down in the Corporation's agreement with Langton. Langton's house was not built until 1609. See J.G.A. Prim, 'Memorials of the Family of Langton, of Kilkenny,' *Transactions of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society* 5 (1864), 59–108.

34 Though not quite identical, the phrase 'to go in stations', recorded in the *OED (Station sb, sub-sense 24) from the mid-fifteenth century on, is sufficiently close to the Kilkenny usage to invite comparison. *OED* gives its meaning as 'to perform the prescribed acts of devotion in succession at certain holy places, or at the Stations of the Cross.' Kilkenny usage would seem to mean something like 'to perform the prescribed acts ... in succession at certain ... places'.

35 Watters, 'Notes of Particulars,' 238.

36 Watters, 'Notes of Particulars,' 239.

37 Whatever happened at a station might at least be related to the play in terms of its subject matter. Those who 'went in stations' were characters like Christ, St Michael and the devil. These characters also featured in the play, though it may not necessarily have been the same person who performed the same part in play and station. In fact, Thomas Langton's warrant to Robert Archer printed above may imply a distinction between the devil that played in the Resurrection and 'the other Devill ... that went in Stations.'

38 See Appendix II below.

39 This is the normal order in other places in the British Isles, wherever it can be determined. (See, for example, A.H. Nelson, *The Medieval English Stage* (Chicago and London, 1974), 91, 142, 155 and 205–06, where this order is noted for Beverley, Coventry, Chester and Newcastle-upon-Tyne respectively.) Moreover, one instance noted in Nelson, 201, where play may have preceded procession (in Perth, Scotland), is ambiguous.

40 Perhaps the 'going in stations' was also part of the Corpus Christi 'riding'. If there was any conservatism about processional routes in Kilkenny (such as has been argued in the case of London, for example, by L.J. Morrissey, 'English Pageant-Wagons,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 9 (1975–76), 353–74), then enough evidence survives of the processional routes taken by Viscount Wentworth in 1637 and by Archbishop Rinuccini in 1645 in their civic entries from which to conjecture the likely route for Corpus Christi. However, these speculations cannot be aired here.
For example, the Resurrection was played in St Mary’s on Midsummer in 1588, and it was also played, this time presumably in the High Street, on Corpus Christi in 1590. (It is most unlikely that two different Resurrection plays were presented.) See Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars,’ 239.

However, this argues from silence, and evidently Midsummer could include a ‘riding’; see Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars,’ 238 (the payment ordered by Arthur Shee to David Savage).

Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars,’ 238.

The question of whether Krininge and Busher are between them ‘setting forth’ the same play on the same day or are ‘setting forth’ the same play on separate occasions has been broached above in note 22. It is interesting to note, incidentally, that both Krininge and Busher must have been literate, and in Krininge’s case, we know he was a ‘clark’ (see Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars,’ 238, and see further on the profession of ‘clark’ note 62 below).

Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars’, 239 (in Thomas Archer's payments ordered on 1st and 25th June respectively).

On the face of it, it looks as if this should be taken to mean that the play was put on inside the church. On the other hand, if the preposition ‘in’ is being used loosely here, perhaps it means that the play was put on in the churchyard. St Mary’s Church had a longstanding connection with the Corporation, and was under its special care. The town clock was in its belfry, and the Corporation paid the clock-keeper a salary. See J.G.A. Prim, ‘The Corporation Insignia and Olden Civic State of Kilkenny,’ Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland 1 (1870), 280–305.

St. J.D. Seymour, Anglo-Irish Literature 1200–1582 (Cambridge, 1929), 131, reconstructed a ‘Kilkenny cycle’ of five plays: a play of Christ’s temptation, of his Crucifixion, of the three Marys, of the Resurrection, and of the Last Judgement. There are difficulties with this reconstruction, however. The apparent inclusion of one of the two Bale plays (‘a Commedie of sanct Johan Baptistes preachinges of Christes baptisyng and of his temptacion in the wildernesse’) is unwarranted; also, the presence of St Michael and assorted devils, which has presumably suggested the Last judgment to Seymour, fits more nearly a play of the Harrowing of Hell.


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Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars,’ 239; there is a misprint in this entry, for the year ‘1598’ is recte 1593.

Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars,’ 241.

There was also a payment to the musicians of the Corpus Christi play this year (see Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars,’ 241), the first and only mention of musical accompaniment in the plays.

In various warrants in Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars,’ 240–42; these men also acted similar roles on Midsummer too.

The only evidence of part doubling comes from the Nine Worthies pageant. A ‘Conqueror’ seems to be a general term for a Worthy. Sometimes the Worthies are named, as are Godfrey and Hector here; Julius Caesar and Joshua are mentioned in a 1602 warrant (see Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars,’ 239–40).

The Dublin Nine Worthies pageant is first recorded in the Chain Book of Dublin Corporation, fols 56v–57v (see J.T. Gilbert, Calendar of Ancient Records of Dublin (Dublin, 1889), 1, 239–41. There is evidence for a large-scale Corpus Christi procession in Dublin at least from 1466, however (see Gilbert, Calendar, 324), and the wording
of the Chain Book implies that the pageants recorded in it were already being presented for several years.

57 National Library of Ireland ms 16085, 113 (the notebook of Edmund Sexton of Limerick, c 1590–1630). Possibly Sexton had seen a Nine Worthies pageant at some time or other; civic pageantry was certainly staged in Limerick in the sixteenth century (the evidence will be printed in REED: Ireland).

58 All these families were of Anglo-Norman origin, apart from the family of Shee, which was Irish. A couplet naming the chief families — ‘Archdekin, Archer, Cowley, Langton, Ley/Knaresborough, Lawless, Ragget, Rothe and Shee’ — was well known in Kilkenny and circulating there already by the eighteenth century.

59 The name of Lawless would seem to connect them with one of the ruling families, but how they might be related I have not yet ascertained.

60 Perhaps also particular families tended to be involved at the production end. (Compare the Mary Rothe/William Coursey link noted above.) It would be interesting to know how the ‘setters forth’ went about selecting their cast.


62 See Watters, ‘Notes of Particulars,’ 238. There remains a question, of course, of what it is exactly that ‘Clark’ means, both in Krininge’s case and Kelly’s. The word might be used to signify an officer who has charge of records (see OED Clerk, sub-sense 6), or it might mean, as I suspect, a cleric. More work will be necessary before I can resolve the ambiguity.

63 See Prim, ‘Olden Popular Pastimes,’ 328.

64 See W. Healy, History and Antiquities of Kilkenny (County and City) (Kilkenny, 1893), i, 171–72.

65 REED research has not revealed, to my knowledge, anything later.
Inscribed on dorse:

The humble peticion of William Coursy
20 September 1603
The maior and aldermen being so assembled together at the newe tholsell of the Citty of kilkinny concluded and agreede that the peticioner shall haue for his paynis taken aboute the sayd play of the Corporacion Revenews the some of twenty shillings Irishe
George Shee
maior Kilkenny

Inscribed on obverse:
The humble peticion of William Coursy
To the woorschipfull the mayour
and aldermen of the Citty of Kilkenny
Shewinge That where your suppliant was promised to haue as much this last yeare for settinge foorth of Corpus Xpi play as he had any other yeare, wervpponyour suppliant bestowed his labour and paynes in settinge foorth the same in the best manner he could the last Corpus Christi day, not doubtinge of performance of that promise, he hauinge had thirty shillings sterling the yeare before for the like service. And wheras your suppliant was allowed fifteen shillings sterling yearly, for keepinge safe and preseruinge the cloathes and other ornaments belonginge to the comedy of the resurrecion, wherof your suppliant was payd for several yeares, but for fivé yeares past your suppliant hath not beene paid thereof, although he hath carefully kept and preserued the said cloathes and ornments: The premises considered, It may therfore please your woorships to take or chose for satisfiing your suppliant was well of the said 30' for settinge foorth the said last Corpus Xpi play, as of the areares of the said fifeteene shillings, for the said fivé yeares last past for keepinge the said ornments, amountinge to 3'--15' sterlimg. And your suppliant shall pray etc.

APPENDIX II

Personnel connected with Kilkenny Civic Drama, 29th May, 1580 – 22nd September, 1639:

Named:
John Rothe fitz Jenkin. Town bailiff. 29th May, 1580; 6th June, 1580.
Adam Shee. Rider on Corpus Christi and Midsummer eve, presumably in 1580; again presumably in 1585.
Peter Shee. Superior of Kilkenny. 29th May, 1580; 6th June, 1580.
Richard Nogell. Placer of the stations on Corpus Christi in 1580.
Edward Rothe. ?Town bailiff. 6th June, 1582.
David Savage. Rider on Corpus Christi, presumably in 1582; again on Corpus Christi and Midsummer eve, presumably in 1584.
Robert Rothe. Sovereign of Kilkenny. 6th June, 1582.
Darby Brennan. ?Town bailiff. 21st May, 1584.
Arthur Shee. Sovereign of Kilkenny. 21st May, 1584. Deputy Sovereign, 7th and 9th June, 1585.
Edmund Raggett. ?Town bailiff. 1584 (precise date not specified).
William Coursey. Actor and player of trumpeter's part on Corpus Christi and Midsummer Eve, presumably in 1584.
Thomas Pembroke fitz David. Town bailiff. 7th June, 1585.
Patrick Morgan. Freren bailiff. 9th June, 1585.
James Krininge. Clark and setter forth of the Marys. Presumably sometime before or after 9th June, 1585.

Piers Archdekin
Thomas Archer
Walter Archer
Edward Langton

Subscribers to payment of James Krininge. 9th June, 1585.

Richard Ragget. Sovereign of Kilkenny. 3rd June, 1585.
James Langton. Town bailiff. 3rd June, 1585.
John Busher. Setter forth of the Marys. Presumably sometime before or after 3rd June, 1585; again presumably sometime before or after 1st June, 1588; setter forth of the Resurrection on Midsummer day, 1588.
Redmond Savage. Town bailiff. 1st June, 1588; presumably again on 25th June, 1588.
Thomas Archer. Sovereign of Kilkenny. 1st June, 1588; again on 18th and 19th June, 1593.
Robert Archer. Town bailiff. 18th June, 1590.
Thomas Langton. Sovereign of Kilkenny. 18th June, 1590.
John St Leger. Town bailiff. 18th and 19th June, 1593.5
Thomas Lucas. Setter forth of the Marys on Corpus Christi, 1593; actor of Charlemagne, and paid 'half a Conqueror's wadge' for his effort presumably sometime before or after 19th June, 1593.6

Robert Rothe
Geoffrey Rothe
Edward St Leger

Subscribers to payment of Thomas Lucas, 18th and 19th June, 1593.

John Mony. Town bailiff. 17th June, 1600.
Simon Archer. Actor of a Conqueror on Midsummer eve, presumably in 1600.
Heilias Shee. Sovereign of Kilkenny. 17th June, 1600.

Richard Shee
Edward Ragget

Subscribers to payment of Simon Archer. 17th June, 1600.

William Kyvan. Freren bailiff. 31st May and 2nd June, 1602.
John Kennedy. Setter forth of the Marys. Presumably sometime before or after 2nd June, 1602; again presumably sometime before or after 20th June, 1603.
Patrick Archer. Superior of Kilkenny. 31st May and 2nd June, 1602.

Robert Rothe
John Rothe fitz Piers

Subscribers to payment of John Kennedy. 2nd June, 1602.

John Lawless. Actor of a Conqueror presumably sometime before or after 17th June, 1600; standard bearer on Corpus Christi, presumably in 1602; actor in Corpus Christi play, presumably 1603.
Philip Lawless. Actor of a Conqueror, presumably sometime before or after 17th June, 1600; actor of Joshua, presumably sometime before or after 31st May, 1602.
William Coursey. Setter forth of the Corpus Christi play in 1602; also in 1603; preserver of clothes and props for the 'comedy of the Resurrection' for more than five years before 1603.
Robert Rothe} Subscribers to payment of John Lawless, William White and George Comerford Philip Lawless. 31st May, 1602.

William Kelly. Actor of St Michael, presumably sometime before or after 2nd June, 1602.

John Murphy. Actor of Satan, presumably sometime before or after 2nd June, 1602; actor in Corpus Christi play, presumably 1603.

Robert Rothe} Subscriber to payment of William Kelly and John Murphy. 2nd June, 1602.

Patrick Mony. Freren bailiff. 20th June, 1603.

Lucas Shee. Superior of Kilkenny. 20th June, 1603.

R. Shee Thomas Archer Nicholas Langton} Subscribers to payment of John Kennedy. 20th June, 1603.

Walter Archer Richard Shee} Payers of John Murphy. 20th June, 1603.

James Brian. Payer of John Lawless. 20th June, 1603.

R. Shee P. Archer Arthur Shee} Subscribers of payment to John Murphy and John Lawless. 20th June, 1603.

George Shee. Mayor of Kilkenny. 20th September, 1603.


Thomas Daniel. Actor of St Michael sometime in 1636. His payment ordered for props for St Michael in the Corpus Christi play. 4th June, 1637.

James Cowley. Mayor of Kilkenny. 30th May, 1st June, 4th June, 7th June, 8th June, 10th June, 17th June, 8th July and 26th September, 1637.

Patrick Murphy} Subscriber of payment to Thomas Daniel. 30th May, 1637.

John Purcell. Actor of a Conqueror on Corpus Christi and Midsummer, 1637.

William Shee} Subscriber of payment to John Purcell. 1st June, 1637.

Subscriber of payment ordered to Thomas Daniel. 4th June, 1637. Treasurer, 8th July, 1637. Also subscriber of payment to James Barry. 10th June, 1637.

Henry Archer} Subscriber of payment to John Purcell. 1st June, 1637.

Subscriber of payment ordered to Thomas Daniel. 4th June, 1637. Subscriber of payment to Matthew Hickey. 7th June, 1637.

Subscriber of payment to William Lawless. 17th June, 1637.

Subscriber of payment to John Palmer. 26th September, 1637.

Robert Rothe} Subscriber of payment ordered to Thomas Daniel. 4th June, 1637.
Christopher Coyne. Copyist of the book of Corpus Christi plays. Sometime before 4th June, 1637.

Richard Cowley. Subscriber of payment to the musicians of the Corpus Christi play. 8th June, 1637. Subscriber of payment to John Palmer. 26th September, 1637.

Peter Rothe. Subscriber of payment to Matthew Hickey. 7th June, 1637. Subscriber of payment to the musicians of the Corpus Christi play. 8th June, 1637. Subscriber of payment to John Palmer. 26th September, 1637.

Matthew Hickey. Actor of two Conquerors on Corpus Christi and Midsummer 1637. Actor of a Conqueror on Corpus Christi and Midsummer, 1639.

Mary Rothe. William Coursey's wife, paid for a breakfast given to the young men who acted in the Corpus Christi play. 8th July, 1637.

Thomas Archer. Warrantor and subscriber of payment to Mary Rothe, William Coursey's wife. 8th July, 1637.


Unnamed:
Eight pairs of gloves for the 'Maryes', implying eight characters? Presumably players on some occasion in 1585.

Christ
Mary Mother
John the Evangelist
The 'other three Maryes'  

Players on some occasion in 1585.

Six pairs of gloves of the 'Maryes', implying six characters? Presumably players on some occasion in 1588.

St Michael
Devil

The 'other Devill'

Players in the Resurrection on Corpus Christi, presumably in 1590.

Christ
St Michael


The Marys. Players (number unspecified) on Corpus Christi in 1593.

The Marys.

' Him that plaies the Divell in Stacions.' Player who 'went in stations' on some occasion in 1602.

The Marys.

Players (number unspecified) on some occasion in 1603.

27
'Him that plays [Belfiger] ... and goeth about in Stacions.' Player who 'went in stations' on Corpus Christi in 1603.

'Young Men that acted uppon the Stage.' Players (number unspecified) on Corpus Christi in 1637.

Musicians (number unspecified) for the Corpus Christi play in 1637.

NOTES

1 The spelling of Irish surnames has been standardized in this Appendix according to their modern form.
2 The sources of these names are as follows: Watters, 'Notes of Particulars'; Prim, 'Olden Popular Pastimes'; National Library of Ireland MS D.3302; Kilkenny Corporation Archives, documents printed in Appendix i.
3 'Superior' is probably an alternative to 'Sovereign', the title adopted by the head of the Corporation until 1609 when Kilkenny acquired the status of a city in The Great Charter. At this date 'Sovereign' was replaced by 'Mayor' (although evidently 'Mayor' was being used occasionally in documents before 1609, as William Coursey's petition in Appendix i illustrates).
4 The Freen Bailiff appears to have been a official responsible for administering church lands ceded to the Corporation at the Reformation.
5 1593 is misprinted as 1598 in Watters, 'Notes of Particulars', 239.
6 1593 is misprinted as 1598 in Watters, 'Notes of Particulars', 239.
7 Watters, 'Notes of Particulars', 240, reads 'Kelfiger', but this may be either a misprint or a misreading of the more likely name for a devil, 'Belfiger'.
Fig. 1: Map based upon John Rocque, A Survey of the City of Kilkenny (1758). Scale: 1.5 cms. = 100 ft.
Fig. 2: High Street in the area of the Market Cross. Dotted lines indicate a hypothetical placing of crowd control barriers.