
61 John Marshall, 'Modern Productions of Medieval English Plays,' in Richard Beadle (ed), The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre, 305. This production even used the marginal 'daunce' directions as a means for moving the audience from station to station.


64 Tyndale, 226.

65 Tyndale, 185.

66 'The Obedience of a Christian Man,' 184.

67 Tyndale, 'A Pathway Into the Holy Scripture,' in Henry Walter (ed), Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of Holy Scriptures, 16.


69 Frederic Ives Carpenter (ed), The Life and Repentance of Marie Magdalene by Lewis Wager, 61. I have changed 'revealed' to 'revealed.'


71 'King Johan,' in Happé (ed), The Complete Plays of John Bale, vol. 1, 98.

PAMELA M. KING

The York and Coventry Mystery Cycles: A Comparative Model of Civic Response to Growth and Recession

The York Cycle in its surviving form from the third quarter of the fifteenth century contains all or part of forty-eight pageants. Half a century earlier, when the Ordo Paginarum was recorded in the AlY Memorandum Book, the list of subjects undertaken by the guilds was longer. From Coventry only two pageants survive, both redactions from the second quarter of the sixteenth century. There is, additionally, evidence that we have lost the Smiths' pageant of the Passion, the Pinners and Needlers' pageant of the Death and Burial of Christ, the Cappers' pageant of the Harrowing of Hell and/or Resurrection, the Mercers' pageant of the Death and Assumption of the Virgin, and the Drapers' Doomsday. The Tanners (from 1497), the Whittawers and the Girdlers also had pageants, but the subjects of these are lost.

All the above has the status of common knowledge, thanks to the amassing of numerous shards of evidence which has been largely undertaken by the Records of Early English Drama project. It is also part of an information crisis. While it was relatively easy for E.B. Chambers to construct sequential evolutionary narrative from the limited amount of data available to him, scholars working in the wake of REED are increasingly aware of how we write our narratives into the spaces in order to create a meaningful history. As
evidence piles up it becomes less acceptable to make definitive claims, particularly that anything has disappeared without trace. There is a level of intertextuality now which leads, if not to better histories, at least to constructive fragmentation. Simple polarities of comparison, in particular, are dismantled. For example, the common approach to understanding what Coventry's cycle may have been like have tended in the past to be based upon how it differed from the complete extant cycles, particularly — because it is early and so in some way normative — York's. This is one of the oversimplifications, encouraged perhaps by the undiscriminating use of anthologies in undergraduate study, which leads to the mismatching of information across more than a century of rapid urban change and economic decline.

The process of the economic histories of York and Coventry through the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries has been written up in some detail. In 1377 York, Bristol and Coventry were the largest centres of urban population after London. In 1465–9, Coventry joined Bristol, Norwich and York as the rural mints. In 1507, Coventry was second to only London and York in standing surety for the proposed marriage of the king's daughter with the Emperor's grandson. Even in the 1520s, York and Coventry were very close in fiscal size, though by then smaller than Norwich. To York's 871 taxpayers, Coventry had 713. Both were also major ecclesiastical centres for their respective dioceses, with religious houses of all the major endowed and mendicant orders including wealthy Benedictine monasteries.

There were, however, differences which rendered York more resilient, Coventry much more vulnerable when slump came. Where York sits at the confluence of the Ouse and the Foss, a position of natural fortification and navigable communication, Coventry is near no navigable waterways, so was prey to shifting fashions in overland travel and to competition from adjacent areas where the Avon was navigable. York was the ecclesiastical and lay capital of the North, whereas the fulcrum of Coventry's diocese was Lichfield, from which it was separated by a sparsely populated and heavily forested region. York was, as Jennifer Kermode has observed, to some extent insulated from economic fluctuation by, 'antiquity, size, regional and national pre-eminence.' The Hull Customs Accounts reveal York's brisk and active trading relations with the Low Countries as well as the city's successful diversification of export trade after the collapse of the wool trade at the end of the fourteenth century, successfully supplementing the shift to cloth exports with other manufactured goods and raw materials. Yet even York was, 'clearly less prosperous at the end of the fifteenth century than in the late fourteenth century.' Coventry was a one-trade town, dependent on its manufacture of textiles for its economic position. In the same period it was in severe economic crisis.

The guild structure, routinely accustomed to protecting trade at times of bad harvest, had practised responses to economic decline. Manufacturers protect themselves from the operation of drastic market forces by operating monopolistic mechanisms maintaining artificially high prices when food is cheap to tide them over periods of sluggish trading. They do this by controlling the labour supply — by levies, by long apprenticeships, and by strictly controlled access to permission to manufacture and trade. At times of prolonged hardship the guilds, according to these principles, did not cut prices but limited expenditure. Festive activity was not perceived as a dispensable luxury, however, nor, according
to the balance of opinion, did the middle classes leave cities to escape such burdens.\(^4\) The central validatory and sanctificatory role of mystery plays, their importance for 'worship' in particular, is supported by evidence that even at times of great hardship measures were taken to maintain cycles of plays. As the cost of producing the same festive event would remain largely the same, as prices of materials and services were subject to protectionist strategies, other forms of rationalisation were called for. Hence it can be commonly observed in records from York and elsewhere that when single guilds struggled, internal re-shuffling ensured that the narrative coherence of the cycle was not threatened. Coventry, however, in the period when the remnants of its cycle were artificially arrested for posterity, had been through a more serious economic dilapidation. The virtual collapse of its cloth industry had coincided with a terrible visitation of plague in 1479, so that by 1490 the population was half its peak.\(^7\) The long composite plays written by Robert Crow in the 1530s begin to look like a radical response to these conditions, with surviving guilds which had the economic power carrying a remodelled cycle. Recently it has even been suggested that the long composite pageants shared paid players.\(^9\)

Economic decline is not the sole reason for guild amalgamation. What the difference between the Ordo Paginarum lists for York in 1415 and the plays in the Register from the third quarter of the fifteenth century makes clear is that the story of York's cycle is one of some guild collaboration and amalgamation before serious slump conditions prevailed. The steady subsuming of sub-crafts into master crafts which characterises English urban organisation throughout the fifteenth century is all part of the development of capitalism,\(^7\) but it is a process which was hastened by recession and depopulation.

Early mystery play records in England coincide with that peak in urban growth, in a post-Black Death context, which was impelled largely by the economic circumstances associated with the cloth trade. But, as Martin Stevens long ago suggested in comparing the York Register with the Ordo Paginarum, it may be that a certain level of trade grouping and co-ordination was necessary before the transition from procession to plays as we recognise them in York could be made.\(^10\) A continuation of the same process, already underway as a side-effect of developing capitalism, seems to have protected the cycles in less affluent times. Certainly later York records demonstrate effects similar to, if not so extensive as, those whose results we can observe in what we know of the Coventry cycle. For example, in 1515 the York Tilers' pageant is described as being in a 'ruynous & dekayed' condition despite the annual contributions of the Millers and Saucemakers, both of which had their own apparently autonomous pageants within the Passion sequence a hundred years earlier.\(^11\)

Coventry's general problem from the mid fifteenth century was a decline in the textile industry upon which the city depended so heavily. The distinctiveness of Coventry textiles in their heyday was the production of Coventry 'blue,' a cloth dyed with woad fixed with alum. Dying was a key craft in the city. In the first period of slump supplies of woad through Southampton collapsed, and the Genoese importation of alum failed in 1443/4 and 1459/60, while in 1477/78 the supply of Toulouse woad also dried up.\(^12\) The Drapers, who had a controlling interest as middle men in the textile trades, can be observed in the same period breaking the Dyers' monopoly. There is no evidence that the Dyers ever had a pageant, despite being the eighth largest of Coventry's guilds in 1454 and third in level...
of participation in civic office. Only the Wiredrawers have comparable strength and show
no evidence of having had a play.

An ordinance of 10 April 1494 states that Chandlers and Cooks are to contribute in
future to the Smiths' pageant, and further,

\[
\text{ffor asmoche as pe vnyte concorde & amyte of all citeez &}
\]

\[
\text{cominualteez is principally atteyned & continuned be due}
\]

\[
\text{Ministration of justice & pollytyk guydyng of pe same forseyng}
\]

\[
\text{pat no persone be oppressed nor put to ferther charge then he}
\]

\[
\text{conuenyently may bere and pat every persone withoute fauour}
\]

\[
\text{be contributory after his substance & faculteez pat he vseth to}
\]

\[
\text{every charge had & growyng for the welth & worship of the hole}
\]

\[
\text{body and where so it is in his City of Couentre that dyuers charges}
\]

\[
\text{haue be continued tyme oute of mynde for the worship of the}
\]

\[
\text{same as paganter and such other whch haue be born be dyuers}
\]

\[
\text{Craftes whech crates at be begynnynge of such charges were more}
\]

\[
\text{welthy rich and moo in nombre then be as openly appereth}
\]

\[
\text{for whch causez they nowe be not of powier to continue he se}
\]

\[
\text{Charges without relief & comfort be shewed to them in pat partie}
\]

The crafts singled out include Dyers, Skinners, Fishmongers, Cappers, Corvisers, Butchers
and divers others who are to be joined up to others who are overcharged with their
pageants. One might expect that if the Dyers had had a pageant, some evidence would
appear in the records before 1494, but it does not. However the records of all the known
playing guilds with the exception of the Smiths are very sparse before that date. There is
no reference to the pageants of the Mercers, Girdlers or Pinner and Tilers. Of the rest,
we know from land transactions only that the Weavers, the Drapers, the Shearmen and
Taylors and the Whittawers all had buildings known as pageant houses from at least
1407, and that the Cardmakers, Saddlers, Masons and Painters were considered as one
company for the purposes of bringing forth a pageant, subject unknown, in 1441. In
short, the Coventry cycle as we have come to recognise it is in any meaningful sense a
product of sixteenth-century texts and records, its distinctiveness a product of conformity
to the economic auspices of those days. The cycle may not always have taken that form.
Although there is no evidence of, for instance, a Dyers' pageant, there are no firm grounds
for concluding that one never could have existed. Indeed, all those named crafts excused
from bearing pageant expenses in 1494 (and we must remember that this includes 'divers
others'), Skinners, Cappers, Fishmongers, Corvisers and Butchers, are listed in the 1445
Corpus Christi riding. Only the desire to construct from the very patchy fifteenth-
century records some kind of complete narrative prehistory of the known situation in
the 1530s definitively excludes them from having had responsibility for staging pageants
during the period when the records of the York cycle are at their most coherent. All the
other crafts mentioned in the ordinance can be tracked in their later collaboration with
those still maintaining pageants.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the retrievable history of the Coventry cycle is
one of contraction and rationalisation. The craft organisations which we know to have been able to maintain pageants on known subjects right up to and through the sixteenth century all have certain economic characteristics in common. Many guilds in the textile industry seem to have maintained sufficient numbers to continue to support a pageant, probably because they began strongest and had assimilated subsidiary specialists. The Shearmen and Taylors, not a new alliance, had been linked since early in the fifteenth century as the guild of St George. 

Originally they seem also to have embraced the Fullers, Walkers and Cappers, although the Cappers (who, like the Tanners, prospered while many failed) had their ordinances admitted to the Leet in 1496. The Cappers had even taken over the Weavers' play in 1529, although the arrangement was temporary, and the Weavers survived as pageant sponsors. Even so, they needed help from the Walkers and Skinners in the early sixteenth century when the regulation of country-woven cloth was giving trouble. What decline meant was a drop from about 57 Weavers in 1450 to about 37 in 1522–3, despite the craft's continuing demand for a skilled, and therefore static, labour force.

The Drapers in Coventry operated by having a monopoly power of buying and selling within the textile industry as whole, hence their connection with the demise of the Dyers' guild. The Mercers too, in common with the same guild elsewhere, were insulated by controlling imports into the city and spreading their risk across many foreign markets. The Coventry Mercers diversified to include grocers, vintners and hatters, and by 1566 also slatery, linen drapery, haberdashery, small silk wares, hats, caps and trimmings. The Smiths may initially seem the odd one out in this elite, but they too were chiefly a trading guild. Medieval urban smiths did not make their own iron, but bought it from bloomsmiths, controlling its supply and price to lorimers, locksmiths, cutlers and others, or subsuming these crafts within their own guild. More importantly, in Coventry which had its own mint, goldsmiths were part of the same guild. Goldsmiths also acted as wholesale merchants in products which tolerated very high profit margins.

These, then, are the survivors, in pageantry as in trade, by skill, specialism or fashion, or by trade in high-profit luxury goods, sucking in other associations of occupations less well insulated by cartel or monopoly potential at times of recession. These are also the associations which enabled Coventry's cycle to continue, who commissioned long composite plays performed on more than one vehicle or element of staging. If one discounts all those crafts with pageant houses but no known subject, and concentrates purely on the known plays of the mightiest guilds, it is possible to see that that alone presents a moderately coherent sequence from the Annunciation to the Slaughter of the Innocents, through the Purification and Christ before the Doctors, to the Trials, Passion, Death, Burial, Harrowing of Hell and Resurrection of Christ, to the later life of the Virgin and, thereby to the Last Judgement. There is no evidence for Old Testament plays in the Coventry cycle in the early sixteenth century, but so sparse are the records for the period when there was a much larger population and a larger number of autonomous crafts, that the possibility that there once were cannot be wholly discounted either. The only proto-cycle which can be constructed with any degree of confidence looks increasingly like an intelligent pruning exercise.

This paper does not set out simply to revise the way in which we compare the plays of
York with those of Coventry, so much as to suggest a move away from an a-chronological
essentialist reading of the difference between the two productions towards an appropriately
historicised account. Crow’s Coventry plays also demonstrate theological preoccupations
which place them firmly in the 1530s. For example, the expository passages which he
wrote as links between discrete episodes in the two extant plays suggest a preoccupation
with Lutheran or Zwinglian ideas, far from the confident sacramentalism which pervades
the plays in the York Register, and closer, as one would expect, to the intellectual con-
structions evident in some of the Chester pageants. What is inescapable is that we have
a body of imperfect evidence about the cycles in the form of texts of assorted date, nature
and status, which, as we amass more and more information, paradoxically undermines
its status as a definitive corpus.

Notes

1 Alexandra Johnson and Margaret Rogerson, eds, Records of Early English Drama: York
(Toronto, 1979), 16–26. See also Martin Stevens and Margaret Dorrell, ‘The Ordo

2 Standard works include: C. Phythian-Adams, Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban
Crisis of the Late Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1979), 7–30; J.L. Bolton, The Medieval English
Economy 1150–1500 (London, 1985), 246–86; D.M. Palliser, ‘A Crisis in English Towns?
The Case of York, 1460–1640,’ Northern History, 14 (1978), 108–25, from which the
following historical data are drawn.

3 Jennifer Kermode, ‘Urban Decline? The Flight from Office in Late Medieval York,’ EHR,

4 Wendy Childs, ed., Customs Accounts of Hull 1453–90, Yorkshire Archaeological Society

5 Bolton, Medieval English Economy, 248.

6 The debate on this issue amongst medieval economic historians can be traced through:
J.N. Bartlett, ‘The Expansion and Decline of York in the later Middle Ages,’ EHR, 12/2
(1959/60), 17–33; Palliser, ‘A Crisis in English Towns?’; S.H. Rigby, ‘Urban Decline in
the Later Middle Ages,’ Urban History Yearbook (1979), 46–59; Susan Reynolds, ‘Decline
and Decay in Late Medieval Towns,’ Urban History Yearbook (1980), 76–9; A.R. Brid-
Kermode, ‘Urban Decline?’.

7 Bolton, Medieval English Economy, 258.

8 Margaret Rogerson, ‘Casting the Coventry Weavers’ Pageant,’ Theatre Notebook, 48/3


11 Johnson and Rogerson, York, 212.

12 Phythian-Adams, Desolation of a City, 41.

13 R.W. Ingram, Records of Early English Drama: Coventry (Toronto, 1981), 79.

14 Ingram, 5–7.
Reformers, Rogues or Recusants? Control of Popular Entertainment and the Flouting of Authority in Cheshire before 1642

In 1618, William Ashton of Knutsford, a piper, was indicted 'for saying there had bene a strife for many yeres betwixt pipers & prechers but now (god be thanked) pipers had gotten the victory.' Ashton's claim of victory was overly optimistic, but his suggestion that there was 'strife' between the pipers and preachers is borne out by the records. In particular, as Ashton found to his cost, there was an upsurge of anti-entertainment orders in and around the year 1617. Regulations concerning the breaking of the Sabbath were more strictly enforced and pipers, minstrels, bearwards, and so forth were singled out for harassment by the officials and castigation by the preachers. This stricter social control is particularly useful for Records of Early English Drama, as various skirmishes in the struggle between the preachers and the pipers (and other entertainers) are recorded in the legal and ecclesiastical documents of the period. My intention, then, is to present a few incidents in which entertainment may have been used as a weapon in the struggle against, to borrow a line from a Coventry document, 'men very commendable for their behaviour and learning, & sweet in their sermons, but somewhat too sour in preaching away theyr pastime.' The question then to be considered is whether those who struggled on the side of the pipers were resisting out of religious convictions of their own, self-interest, or simply a desire to cause trouble. It is not always easy to distinguish. William Ashton's pious aside 'god be thanked' seems to suggest that he considered God to be on the side of the pipers, and its inclusion in the indictment may indicate that it was considered offensive in itself, although we cannot tell if offence was intended.

Following on from King James' Book of Sports there were increasing attempts on the part of the authorities to control the pastimes of the people. In 1616, a list of objections