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 'stiffe' between the pipers and prechers 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 prechers. This stricter social control is particularly useful for Records of Early English Drama, as various skirmishes in the struggle between the prechers 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 commendabl for their behauior and learning, & sweet in their sermons, but sumwhat 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
to wakes focused mainly on the offences caused by the entertainments offered by alehousekeepers:

There is an evil Custom within this County of Chester, that in every Parish once in the year they keep Wake, as there is no one reason to maintain the use, so there are many that it should not be used. /

These Alehousekeepers to draw people the rather to come, procure Bearewardes and their Beares, minstrels, lugers and such like to make the people sport. / These delights draw a great recourse of people, especially of the younger sort, as men's sons, daughters and servants, without regard of their Masters occasions (although it be in Harvest time, as most usually it is) and if this liberty be denied them, either they will refuse their service, or doe it so repiningly as will be no good to the Masters profit: Many times it is known these people steal from their Parentes & Masters to spend at this time. /

There doth repair at these times to these places great Multitudes of Rogues and idle Wandring beggars, which pester the neighbours exceedingly for a week before and a week after. /

The other main concern was that excess of drink would lead to drunkenness, quarrels, and even manslaughter. The conclusion of this list claims that the Justices of the Peace may 'easily redresse these abuses' by ensuring that the alehousekeepers do not provide any extra ale for the wakes, and by attending the wakes themselves and 'to banish the Bearewardes and minstrels from those places, that the people may have occasion to staye.' Very easy to say, but, as the Justices already knew, not so easy to do. Attempts to control and limit the entertainment had been going on for fifty years at least prior to the 1616 complaint. In 1565–6, an order was given to High Constables of the hundreds to report on any cockfighting taking place in their hundreds. Six of the seven hundreds reported the occurrence of cockfighting. /

Wakes were an ongoing source of contention after the Reformation. The more extreme reformers regarded them as 'papistical and profane', and there were accusations that they were a focus for recusancy. In 1594, an accusation of recusancy over wakes and entertainment at Little Budworth went as far as the Star Chamber. / The case is long and complex, but essentially is based on a clash of opinions between two of the local gentry, John Egerton, who issued a prohibition to the local constables against the wakes, and John Starkey, and his family, especially his son Hugh, who supported the wakes, being, as Egerton describes them 'greatly affected & supersticiously (...)clined to the observing & keeping of the same wakes & such other like vayne & abolished Trash.' / The constables were evidently pro-wakes, as, upon receiving Mr Egerton's prohibition, they went to Mr Starkey, who 'did persuade & incourage them' to hold the wakes notwithstanding the prohibition. In addition, one of the constables, Hugh Holbrook, was actively involved in some of the 'disorderly activities' which took place at the wakes:
And vpon the tuesday after the said wake daye diuerse of the said Rouges and evyll disposed persons having in ther handes greene boughes resembling Maygames came dauncing into the sayd towne of little Budworthe with a dromme before them and the sayde Constable following after them.7

It would appear from this that not only were the Maygames and dancing being used to flout authority, but that the various levels of authority were not themselves united in their opinions or their actions. Mr Egerton objected to the wakes not only because of their associations with recusancy, but he also because of the more general roguery which seems to have occurred on this occasion, as one deponent witnessed:

at the daye in the Interrogatory mencioned on which day wakes was kepte at little Budworthe One Bennet Hardinge William Carter Elizabeth Salte otherwise called Bounsing Besse and iii or iiii° persons more with them whose names he this deponent nowe remembret not, towards the evening of the sayd sayde* wake daye being weaponed somme of them with staves and somme with Swordes came verye merelie by the hedgyside next adioyning to a Cowpasture of the Complainantes In which pasture the servantes of the said Complainant were mylking or Redye to mylke ther kyne, And when they came against ther kyne stryking on a dromme, This deponent being at the hedg syde nere to the said pasture wylled them that they would forbeare that noyse vntyll they were past the kyne for fearing of them And on of the same Companye badd hime that Caryed the dromme strike on And this deponent aunswered that yf they would not giue ouer the noyse he would strike out the bottome of his dromme.*

Predictably, blows were struck, the cows frightened, and the milk spilled. Bouncing Bess and her companions may have been aware that the cows belonged to Mr Egerton, or they may have simply been sufficiently 'merry' after the wakes that any disturbance was desirable to them. There is a long list of other complaints against the Starkey family, largely concerning land rights and an alleged assault on Mr Egerton, and the Star Chamber eventually found against them. Religious differences do seem to have played a part in this quarrel, but it is impossible to say whether they were the cause of the evident personal animosity, the economic rivalry and the power struggle between the two families, or simply a side issue. What is clear is that the bearbaits, the Maygames and dancing, and the revellers with their drum, were very effectively disruptive. The wakes are alleged to have disturbed the whole town and indeed the 'proper order', as the constable himself was involved in upholding the disruption.

Bearbaits were a pastime particularly objected to by the more extreme reformers, and this fact may have led to it being used as a means of baiting the Puritans as well as the bears. In 1618 at Bunbury the Constable for the Hundred of Eddisbury presented John Boland 'for beating his bea[t]res at Bunbury at Snt Lames tyde at the Rushbearing there being never non before, 'contrary to kings booke.'11,12 The constable is careful to note that bearbaiting at a rushbearing is an innovation, and certainly this is the only example
of it that I have found. As the reformers were against rushbearings as well as bearbaitings, it is possible that those who hired Boland were aware that they would be annoying the authorities, and especially the more 'Puritan' element among them by including a bearbait in the rushbearing. It would also seem that by so doing they were moving away from the original religious associations of the rushbearing, which they Puritans objected to as 'popish and profane'. Or, at least, they had become less popish and more profane, which was probably less dangerous at the time. Boland the bearward figures fairly frequently in the records, usually unfavourably. The document quoted above also describes him as a drunkard, 'a horible blasphemer', a wandering rogue, and one who had violent altercations with the High Constable.

There was evidently an ongoing battle at Bunbury between the factions for and against bearbaiting. Edmund Burghall, in his book Providence Improved tells that Mr Hinde, the brother-in-law and biographer of the noted Puritan John Bruen, preached at Bunbury and 'not without Cause much inveighed against those Disorders, which were usually at Bunbury Wakes, & had threatened God's Judgments against the same, but could not prevail utterly to remove them, thro' he endeavoured it to the uttermost.' There is evident satisfaction in Burghall's account of how in 1628 'a remarkable Iudgment light upon a wicked debauched Fellow in Bunbury, one Robinson, a Bear-ward, who followed that unlawfull Calling, whereby God is much dishonoured, (especially at such Popish Festivals called Wakes) was cruelly rent in Peices by a Bear, & soe died fearfully.' Less satisfactory to the Puritans, although they made of it what they could, was the occasion in 1634 when 'A Multitude of People, being set under the Church yard Wall, of the South Side of the Church in Bunbury, at the Time of their Wakes, to see a Bearbait, the Wall suddenly fell down upon them, I yet they were not hurt. They had the same Disorder the year following, & there happened the same Disaster, & the same Deliverance. Oh! the great Patience of Almighty God!' Bearbaitings were firmly associated in the Puritan mind with 'popish festivals', and it is easy to see how those opposed to reformation for whatever reason might choose a bearbait as a simple and profitable way of annoying the reformers.

A discussion of the 'strife betwixt pipers and preachers' would not be complete without a mention of one of the more notable activists on the side of the pipers, Richard Metier, who flourishes in the records between about 1610 and 1634, and possibly longer. He is usually described as 'piper', sometimes also as husbandman, alehousekeeper or tippler. He evidently had a licence to be a piper from the Heir of Dutton, who had the right to license minstrels within the county of Chester, although he is never mentioned in any of the records as actually playing his pipes. His clashes with the law were many and various, ranging from keeping an illegal alehouse to suspicions of theft, intimidation of witnesses, and his potential as a hired assassin. But the case of principal interest from the point of view of entertainment is his clash with Mr Fletcher, Preacher of the Word of God at Siddington. Mr Fletcher has a long list of complaints about Richard Metier, mainly relating to slander and verbal abuse. Either the scribe's pen or Mr Fletcher's indignation runs away with him at one point, leading him to make the complaint 'That your said Peticioner is a wolfe in Sheeps Cloathings,' adding hastily 'beinge soe vncharitable C(...) by Metier,' reminiscent of Dogberry's exclamation 'O, that he were here to write me down an ass! But, masters, remember that I am an ass.' Although Richard
Metier does not seem to have practised his alleged calling of piper very much, he does seem to have had some talent as a mimic, which he used to annoy Mr Fletcher. Amongst the eleven articles in Mr Fletcher's petition against Metier are the following:

2. That the said Metier hath mocked, scorned and deryded your said petitioner in the tyme of divyne service and at the Sermon tyme in the Chapple of Siddington, And that the said Metier, hath vsed to Cracke Nutteres [and] eate Apples, and [eate] "to imitate the takinge of" Tobacco in the said Chapple in the Sermon tyme in disdayne of your petitioner, and in woordes, gesture, and Countenance to mocke and scorne him, And when soever your said petitioner spake against any notorious sinners in his Sermon, as namelie, drunkcardes, whoremungers, and such lyke, Then would the said Metier speake openlye in the hearinge of manye with A most scornefull Countenance and thrustinge out his touunge, when will this Preacher speake of Cuckoldes, Intimatinge thereby that your petitioner was A notorious Cuckcolde, and therefore woulde not speake against him self, nor speake in disgrace of any such men.

4. That the said [Petitioner]'s Metyer doeth most Comonlie vspe vppon the Saboathe daye before his guestes to deryde and mock your said petitioner, and to Counterfett his gesture, Countenance and behaviour in the Pulpitt, and namelye vspe Palme Sunday last, by A most Ridiculous manner of demonstracion, to make his guestes sportt, And to make your petitioner A laughinge stocke Amongst theire Ale Pottes vppon the Saboath daye.

He also is alleged to have called Mr Fletcher 'a palterie fellowe a paltrie knave, a Consciencelesse fellowe, a puritan' and to have said that he had been 'senceles, starkmadd and out of his or thy wittes and that he Called himselfe Christ or said he was Christ.' Mr Fletcher is also careful to point out that this is by no means Metier's first offence: he has abused other preachers, and been imprisoned in Chester Castle. Interestingly, he alleges that Metier has been particularly quarrelsome since he became a piper. This suggests that Metier felt that his licence gave him some measure of security, although since Mr Fletcher mentions that Metier has been 'maymed and beatton' for his behaviour, it would appear that the licence was not as much protection as he might have hoped. Unfortunately, no defence on the part of Richard Metier survives. It would be interesting to know whether any of Richard Metier's allegations against Mr Fletcher were true. His allegation that Mr Fletcher was 'a puritan' is borne out to some degree by Mr Fletcher's own evidence. Certainly the fact that he was a preacher and the choice of topics for his sermons - drunkenness and debauchery - would indicate that he favoured the reformers, and, as he accuses Metier of drunkenness and keeping an alehouse, his choice of sermon topic may have been regarded as provocation by Metier.

Various types of entertainment went from being acceptable and even laudable to 'profane and popish' pastimes within a hundred years. The law, trying to steer a middle course, never succeeded in satisfying either the reformers or the traditionalists. It is not
surprising therefore, that the entertainments were also used as a focus of the discontent of either party. In the Little Budworth wakes case, the division is fairly clearly between two gentry families of opposing religious views. At Bunbury, innovations were added to the traditional pastimes either as a way of emphasizing a determination to continue the festival (recusancy), or because the earlier significance had been lost and all such entertainments were considered equal (roguey). In the case of Richard Metier, we have an undoubted rogue. It would appear that part of the success of the reformers lay in the fact that they were able to goad the supporters of the entertainments into excesses which then justified the suppression of those entertainments. In the strife between the pipers and preachers, the preachers were frequently made to look like fools, but, by 1642, victory was theirs.

Notes

1 London, Public Record Office, CHES 24/114/3, Manucripta et Indictamenta, unfoliated (mb 2). Although I have been careful to make these transcriptions as accurate as possible, it has not been possible to provide copies of all of them for independent checking by REED, and they should be regarded as work in progress. The material here will be published in fully edited form in the Cheshire volume of Records of Early English Drama.


4 London, Public Record Office, CHES 24/96/1, Presentments at the Great Inquest, unfoliated; also CHES 24/96/1, Presentments of the High Constables of the Hundreds, single sheet, unfoliated.

5 I am indebted to Dr Stephen Hindle for this reference.

6 London, Public Record Office, STAC 7/2/24, mb 5 (Bill of Complaint).


8 The dittography is in the ms.

9 London, Public Record Office, STAC 7/2/24, mb 2d.

10 London, Public Record Office, CHES 24/114/4, single sheet, unfoliated, Presentments of the High Constable of Eddisbury Hundred, 25 July 1618. 'Contrary to the kinges booke' is added above the line.

11 London, British Library, Add. ms 5851 (Cole vol 50), ff 52r–70r, 'Mr Burghall, Vicar of Acton in Cheshire his ms intituled Providence Improved,' f 52v.

12 Burghall, Providence Improved, f 52v.

13 Burghall, Providence Improved, f 54r–54v.


15 Chester, Cheshire Record Office, QK 53/2/152, single sheet (13 July 1624).

16 Chester, Cheshire Record Office, EDC 5 (1624)/7, f 4 (3 February 1624/5).