English Guilds and Municipal Authority

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The world of stallage and burgesses, markets and enfeoffments is a strange one indeed for a student of literature. Yet, those of us who are students of the history of entertainment in England have been led into this world through our desire to understand the jurisdictions that sponsored plays, musical entertainments and ceremonial displays during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This paper grows from my own study of the records of drama, music and ceremony in two very different parts of England—the ancient and complex jurisdiction of the city of York¹ and the less defined jurisdiction of the community of Abingdon just south of Oxford in Berkshire.² As I have sought to understand the history of the guilds that sponsored or paid for entertainment in York and Abingdon, I have come to some understanding of the complexities of the relationships between the guilds, fraternities or societies and the municipal authorities with whom they cooperated. The nature of the true relationship is often unclear until 1547, the year that the government of the young King Edward VI dissolved the chantries and religious fraternities. In the life of English towns, this act had an effect almost equal to the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. I hope to be able to demonstrate, by focussing on the events in the years after Dissolution, the variety of ways that the guilds and fraternities related to their civil authorities.

1. Terminology

Anyone launching into a study of this kind, is immediately struck by the bewildering array of words used to describe the organizations. For example, the 1517 account roll of the York Mercers is headed "*Compotus Pauli Gillour aldermannis Ciuitatis Eboracum Magistri Siue Gubernatoris Societatis Marcatorum & Mercerorum eiusdem Ciuitatis Ac ffraternitatis suis Gilde Sancte Trinitatis in ffofsgate.*"³ By 1536, the accounts were rendered

in English but the heading is equally bewildering, “the Accompte of Roberte Halle merchaunt Gouvernour of the ffelyshypp of the Mystery of the Marchauntes and marcers of the Cytye of yorke. Keper of the Confraternytye and Gylde of the blyssed Trenitye ffounded in ffossgate.”⁴ Are we talking about a fellowship, a mystery, a confraternity or a guild? Clearly we are talking about all four at once since the terms seem to have been, in some measure, interchangeable. Susan Reynolds, in her very useful little book *English Medieval Towns*, remarks,

To the confusion of historians the sources seem sometimes to use the words guild, company, society, mystery, and craft almost interchangeably for all these bodies. But just because words like guild, fraternity, and society were used so widely, the associations they describe could be very various. Historians have themselves deepened their own confusion by their odd convention of using the word guild in preference to all others, and then assuming that all guilds were basically trading associations.⁵

Equal confusion often arises as we seek to understand how local government emerged in the late Middle Ages from the patterns of enfeoffment that obtained in the earlier period. The town of Beverley is a case in point. Toulmin Smith in *English Gilds* prints the charters of the Guild of St. John of Beverley along with the documents of the Guilds of St. Helen and St. Mary.⁶ Yet Leach, in his survey of the manuscripts of Beverley for the Historical Manuscript Commission, states categorically that those charters are the early charters of the guild merchant, the embryo town government.⁷ But an undated document from the fifteenth century refers to it as the “Gildae Mercatoriae Sancti Johannis Beverlacensis”⁸ and, by the ordinance of 1430, the clergy of the Guild of St. John of Beverley have a special place in the Corpus Christi procession along with the clergy of the Guilds of Corpus Christi and the Blessed Mary.⁹ I believe that it is safe to say that the Guild of St. John of Beverley was the confraternal wing of the guild merchant of Beverley that, in the fullness of time, became the municipal government.

Other guilds merchant in towns with strong overlords functioned as municipal governments. For example, Reading was dominated by its great Benedictine Abbey. The appointment of the head of the Guild Merchant remained in the gift of the abbot until the dissolution of the abbey in 1542. That year the appointment reverted to the crown and very soon thereafter the town of Reading was incorporated and the council of the Guild Merchant became the council of the new corporation. However, to the

confusion of literary scholars uninitiated into the mysteries of local administration, from as early as 1302 the head of the Guild Merchant was referred to in the Chamberlains' Accounts as "maior" and the council of the guild as the "commune."¹⁰ In dealing with the records of any organization, then, it is wise to be wary of the terminology that is used. We should not seek to categorize the multiplicity of social organisms that evolved in the late Medieval English municipalities by the words that are used to describe them; rather we should seek to define them by what they did and to whom they related.

2. The Royal Authority

Much of our information about the confraternities of England comes from the returns submitted to the Privy Council of Richard II in response to a writ sent to the sheriffs of every county of England in 1388 for return before the following feast of the Purification (February 2, 1389). It read:

... We, strictly enjoining, command you do at once, on sight of these presents, in your full shire-mote, and also in all the cities, boroughs, market towns, and other places in your bailiwick, as well within liberties as without, that all and every the Masters and Wardens of all guilds and brotherhoods whatsoever within your said bailiwick, shall send up returns to us and our council in our Chancery, fully, plainly, and openly, in writing... as to the manner and form and authority of the foundation and beginning and continuance of the gilds and brotherhoods aforesaid: And as to the manner and form of the oaths, gatherings, feasts, and general meetings of the bretheren and sisteren; and of all other such things touching these gilds and brotherhoods: Also as to the liberties, privileges, statutes, ordinances, usages and customs of the same gilds and brotherhoods: And moreover, as to the lands, tenements, rents and possessions, whether held in mortmain or not, and as to all goods and chattels whatsoever, to the aforesaid gilds and brotherhoods in any wise belonging or in expectancy, and in whose hands soever such lands, tenements, rents, possessions, goods or chattels may now be for the use of such gilds and brotherhoods: And as to the true annual value of the said lands, tenements, rents and possessions, and the true worth of the said goods and chattels: Also as to the whole manner and form of all and every concerning or touching the said gilds and brotherhoods....¹¹

At the same time a more straightforward writ was sent to the "Wardens and Overlookers of all the Mysteries and Crafts" of the cities of England to present their charters or letters patent to the council in Chancery again before Candlemas, 1389. The crown seemed to be seeking to establish the

legitimacy of the many confraternities and craft guilds that existed as well as the jurisdiction of the crown over them. This seems to have sprung from a suspicion of these quasi-secret societies and a desire to establish the real wealth of the groups for the purpose of taxation.¹²

By no means all of the guilds and confraternities responded to the writ, and when they did they responded in the most neutral possible way. The Pater Noster Guild of York, for example, after giving a brief explanation of the origin of the guild and its playmaking activities goes on to describe its pious activities with the old and indigent members of the guild and the propagation of the Lord's Prayer within the Minster. Only at the very end of the long return do the wardens of the guild address the issue of assembly asserting that they are "wont to gather together at the end of every six weeks throughout the year to pray especially for the health of the lord king and the good governance of the English realm" as well as "for all the brothers and sisters present and absent, living and dead, and all the benefactors of the said fraternity or the said brothers."¹³ Turning their attention to their possessions they stoutly declare that they possess nothing but the props and costumes for the play ("quidem apparatus ad aliquem alium vsum nisi tantum ad dictum ludum") and a single wooden box to store them in.¹⁴ Most of the other returns are similarly cautious denying any great wealth and stressing the piety of their purpose.¹⁵

Nothing seems to have been done by Richard's council in response to the returns. However, a more significant attempt to control these associations was taken by the parliament of Henry VI in 1437. The preamble to the act states that the confraternities and guilds "make themselves many unlawful and unreasonable ordinances . . . whereby our sovereign lord the King and others be disherited of their profits and franchises."¹⁶ In order to prevent the confraternities from setting up rival claims through their ordinances, the act goes on to state

... that the masters, wardens, and people of every such guild, fraternity or company incorporate . . . shall bring and do all their letters patent and charters to be registered of record before the justices of peace in the counties, or before the chief governors of the said cities, boroughs, and towns where such guilds, fraternities and companies be. And . . . that from henceforth no such masters, wardens, nor people make nor use no ordinance which shall be to the disherison or diminution of the King's franchises. . . .¹⁷

Although this act had no immediate effect in York (since the city already required that the craft guilds present their ordinances to the council for ratification), it may explain why when the religious confraternities were dissolved over a hundred years later, the city assumed responsibility for many of their activities.

3. York Guilds

i) Craft guilds and confraternities

York was one of the midland and northern cities that sponsored a large episodic Biblical play. The play was produced by the city itself at the feast of Corpus Christi but the individual pageants were the responsibility of the craft guilds. One official list indicates that, at one time, fifty-eight guilds were contributing to the great cycle of plays.¹⁸ The evidence suggests that this corporate dramatic act of piety took place almost every year from about 1376 to 1569. The ordinances of the craft guilds all specify the involvement of the craft in the play either as directly sponsoring a pageant or being contributory to the pageant of a related guild. This play was considered to be "in honour and reverence of our lord Jesus Christ and honour and profit of the said city."¹⁹ The mixture of the sacred and the profane in this statement is typical of the attitude of the Medieval townspeople to the relationship between their lives as craftsmen and their lives as churchmen. Some crafts, as well as sponsoring a pageant, also carried torches in the Corpus Christi procession.²⁰ Others, such as the Marshalls and Smiths, in addition to their pageant and torches maintained votive candles and specified that the guild would attend mass together on the feast of St. Loy and the feast of St. Andrew in St. William's Chapel, Ousebridge next to the common chamber where the city council normally met.²¹

However, at least three York craft or trading guilds had confraternal counterparts two of which were formally chartered by letters patent. These were the Carpenters, the Merchant Tailors and the Mercers.

a) The Carpenters and the Holy Fraternity of the Resurrection

The Carpenters with their sub-crafts, were responsible for the pageant of the Resurrection in the Corpus Christi play. The guild also carried torches in the Corpus Christi Procession and an undated grant from the 1420s²² suggests that the craft had long had a confraternal side. The grant, from one Ralph le Furbur, provides an annual sum of six shillings for the

Carpenters to maintain “the candle of St William the Confessor” presumably in the chapel of William the Confessor on Ousebridge. In none of their ordinances and in none of the regular civic records is the guild referred to as anything but the Carpenters or Wrights. However, on February 24, 1487 they entered into an indentured agreement with William Bewyk, the Prior of the Austin Friary. As the second party to the agreement the guild is referred to as “the Holy Fraternite of the Resurreccion of Our Lord mayntened by the carpenterz of the said citie.”²³ By the agreement, the Friars Austin are to offer masses for the souls “of all the brether and systers of the said fraternite” in return for annual payments and the free rent of a small parcel of land adjacent to the friary that would allow the friars access to the River Ouse as long as the masses are sung. However, there is no mention of letters patent and no formal registration of the Holy Fraternity of the Resurrection. The guild seems to have appropriated the name of their pageant to an unregistered confraternity for the purpose of entering into a land transaction with the Friars Austin. This may be an example of the kind of unregulated confraternity that had prompted the legislation of 1437.

b) The Merchant Tailors and the Guild of St. John the Baptist

The Tailors were responsible for the pageant of the Ascension of Christ in the Corpus Christi Play. Indeed the first guild ordinance to mention the existence of the play is one for the Tailors in 1386.²⁴ They were also one of the guilds who, as well as sponsoring a pageant in the play of Corpus Christi carried torches in the procession.

The first mention of the Guild or Fraternity of St. John the Baptist comes in a lease dated 1415 granted by the city to the fraternity of a parcel of land that abuts “on the land and hall of the said fraternity.”²⁵ In 1453, fifteen named tailors of the city of York applied for letters patent to re-establish the guild.²⁶ As part of their petition they asserted that for three hundred years the mystery had maintained a chaplain and pensioners of the craft to honour St. John the Baptist, to celebrate divine service and carry out other charitable acts. However, they went on to say that they could not afford it any longer and wished a license to incorporate the guild with a master and four wardens with the capability of acquiring lands of up to 100s. annually to maintain the chaplain and poor people of the guild.

The hall of the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist, mentioned in the 1415 record, was a significant building in the life of the city as well as the guild. In 1442²⁷ and again in 1453²⁸ the city paid for a barr to be erected inside

the hall. The reason for the first occasion is not specified but on the second occasion it was to accommodate a court of Richard, Duke of York, and his justices. There is no evidence of what happened to the confraternal wing of the Tailors at Dissolution but it is clear that they kept their property. The hall became known as the Merchant Tailors' Hall and continued to be an important assembly place for the city. It still stands and as late as the early eighteenth century it was used as a meeting place for the company who had also recently built almshouses near-by for pensioners of the company.²⁹

c) The Mercers, the Guild of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Guild of the Holy Trinity

By far the best documented example of a craft or mystery having a confraternity associated with it is the Mercers guild with its associated Guild of the Holy Trinity. The records of the Mercers were edited for the Surtees Society by Maud Sellers in the early twentieth century.³⁰ The Mercers were responsible for the spectacular pageant of the Last Judgment in the Corpus Christi Play. Many of their pageant documents survive and it has been possible to reconstruct their activities as play-makers in some detail.³¹ A banner depicting the Trinity was part of the appurtenances of the pageant wagon in 1433 and the somewhat truncated list of properties made in 1526 also names "ye trenette" as part of the wagon.³² Like the Carpenters and the Tailors, the Mercers also carried torches in the Corpus Christi Procession as well as maintaining their various charities.

In her introduction, Sellers traces the foundation of the organization from its beginnings as the Guild of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1357. The guild was ostensibly established in order to support a chaplain who would celebrate divine services in St. Crux church for the royal family and the brethren and sisters of the guild. The brothers turned out to be thirteen merchants and the sisters their wives, sisters and daughters. The licence allows the guild to hold land in mortmain.³³ In 1371, another licence was sought from Edward III in exchange for forty shillings to alter the organization from a guild to a hospital for "chaplains and poor and infirm persons."³⁴ In 1411, the guild, still called the hospital of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary, was granted permission to celebrate mass in Trinity Chapel within the hospital.³⁵ A register of the names of all the members in the guild begins in 1420. It is clear from this document that by this time the normal name of the hospital has become the hospital of the Holy Trinity. It is also clear that however widespread

the membership in the earlier confraternity may have been, the number of non-Mercers and members from other towns rapidly decreases so that the confraternity becomes exclusively members of the Mercers Guild and their women-folk—the Mercers Guild at prayer.³⁶ It is also about this time that the Mercers become the dominant guild in the city and take virtual control of the civic government.

The confraternal aspect of the life of the Mercers seems to have reached its height in the late fifteenth century. The early account rolls of the company (beginning 1432) refer to only the Mercers Guild but by 1474 the heading has changed to “Misterie Mercerorum Eboracum Ac Gilde et fraternitatis *Sancte* Trinitatis in fossgate”;³⁷ by 1517 the word “mistere” has been replaced by “societatis.” The next thirty years saw little change in the title but in 1547 all mention of the confraternity disappears.³⁸ Like the Merchant Tailors, the Mercers managed to keep all their property at Dissolution. Indeed, like the hall of the Merchant Tailors, the Mercers’ hall in Fossgate still stands. We can trace some aspects of the transition that took place at the dissolution of the guilds from the account rolls of the Mercers. The major difference between the 1547 roll and that for 1548 is in the expenses. Whereas the guild had paid rent or fees to various religious houses in the past, they now paid those rents to the crown. However when we look at the receipts section of the accounts it is clear that the properties from which they derived considerable income remained unchanged over the period of the Dissolution.³⁹ It seems that all mention of the religious confraternity was quietly dropped from official documentation although nothing else changed. The seal of the York Mercers Guild still depicts the Holy Trinity.

ii) Religious Guilds or Confraternities

York had three major religious guilds or confraternities each of which was involved in some kind of playmaking and each of which had a uniquely complex relationship with the city. These guilds crossed over the boundaries of craft or occupation and, in the case of the Guild of Corpus Christi, at least, enrolled prominent members from outside the city. The properties and functions of each of these guilds survived the Act of Dissolution because of the action of the city.

a) The Guild of Corpus Christi and the Hospital of St. Thomas

The Corpus Christi Guild was founded in 1408 to honour the real presence of Christ in the eucharist and was one of many similar guilds founded in

the fifteenth century all over Europe. The York guild, however, although it came to be the keeper of the Corpus Christi shrine, was never in charge of the Corpus Christi procession which was already a major part of the civic festival at Corpus Christi time before the guild was established. Over the years from 1408 to 1477 the guild gradually assumed a place of honour and prominence in the procession which it held until Dissolution. However, the participation of the guild was limited to honouring the sacrament and regulating its member priests within the procession.⁴⁰ The guild was bequeathed the Creed Play by William Revetour, deputy town clerk, in 1448.⁴¹ There are five recorded performances of the play before Dissolution including a special performance for Richard III at the time of the investiture of his son as Prince of Wales in the Minster on September 8, 1483. It was played at ten year intervals after 1495 in place of the Biblical cycle at Corpus Christi time and seems to have involved the participation of the craft guilds.⁴² Details of the properties of the play are contained in the account rolls of the guild that survive from 1415.⁴³

Over the course of its life, 16,850 people belonged to the guild. Almost every citizen of York who could afford the annual torch fee of 2d. belonged as well as many people from the surrounding countryside. Leading northern clerics identified themselves with the guild, such as the archbishops of York, the bishops of Carlisle, and Durham, the abbots of St. Mary's York, Fountains, Rievaulx, Selby and Whitby, the priors of Bridlington, Kirkham, Newburgh, Nostell and Watton. Prominent secular figures, especially those associated with the city, also joined, including Richard, Duke of Gloucester (later Richard III but for many years his brother's Lieutenant for the North based in York), his wife Anne, his mother Cecily, Duchess of York, Francis, Viscount Lovell and his wife Anne who were in Richard's train as well as many other local and national dignitaries.⁴⁴ Letters patent for the guild were issued by Henry VI on 6 November, 1458.⁴⁵ In 1478, the Hospital of St. Thomas of Canterbury without Micklegate Bar merged with the Corpus Christi Guild. The only change in the governance of the guild was the addition of "tweyne sadde and discrete personnes temporell,"⁴⁶ lay brethren of the guild to be chosen by the clerical master and six keepers on their election day. Up to this time, the guild had met in the Mercers' Hall or the Hospital of the Holy Trinity but by the merger they acquired property of their own.

Although the splendid shrine of Corpus Christi valued by Edward's commissioners at £210 18s. 2d.⁴⁷ was confiscated at the time of Dissolution,

the Hospital of St. Thomas was not liquidated. The master, Sir William Pinder and six other men struggled to keep it viable for another four years. Finally,

For dyvers and sundry consideracions, the said maister, upon the last daie of Februarie, in the yere of our Lorde God a thowsande fyve hundreth fyfte and one, did call his brether together in the said hospitall, and declared unto his said brether the importune suttes, trobles and vexacions that he susteyned for the defence of the right of the said hospitall, wherapon that he coulede not perceyve that he was able, nor non of his brether to upholde and maynteyne the said house and poore folkes onles ther were some remedy hadd.⁴⁸

The remedy was to invite the mayor and the aldermen to become members of the hospital. In April of that year, the mayor and council joined the hospital whereupon Pinder resigned and the mayor, Richard White, became master and two aldermen became wardens. By this device, the Hospital of St. Thomas was taken over by the city.⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that by this action, the city council considered that in some way it had become the Corpus Christi Guild. In 1554, the city greeted the Marian revival with a whole-hearted return to the old ceremonial ways. The procession of Corpus Christi was reinstated and the chamberlains paid 4d. "for a whyte wand to my Lorde Maior as Master of Corpuscristy gyld the fryday after Corpus cristi day."⁵⁰

Nothing is heard of the Creed Play or its properties at the time of the Dissolution. However, in 1562 the city council agreed to play it "if apon examinacion it may be."⁵¹ Nothing more is heard until February 5, 1565, when James Simson a pewterer and alderman and one of the wardens of the hospital that year brought the "aunciente booke or Regestre of the Crede play to be saffly kept emonges th'evidens as it was before."⁵² Simson had been sheriff in 1547-48.⁵³ Plans were well advanced to perform the play instead of the Biblical cycle in 1568 when Matthew Hutton, dean of the Minster and a moving power in the Ecclesiastical Commission of the North, called the play in to be inspected. His letter to the mayor disallowing the play is one of the major documents revealing protestant opinion of the Catholic drama. In his letter he writes,

ffor thoghe it was plausible 40 yeaeres agoe, & wold now also of the ignorant sort be well liked: yet now in this happie time of the gossell, I knowe the learned will mislike it and how the state will beare with it I knowe not.⁵⁴

All plans to perform the play were abandoned and nothing further is heard of it. By the late sixteenth century only the property of the Guild of Corpus Christi survived in the guise of the Hospital of St. Thomas along with the charitable activities financed by the income from the property. All play-making and processional activity had been suppressed by the increasing puritanism of the time.

b) The Pater Noster Guild and the Guild or Hospital of St. Anthony

The first mention of this guild is in the reply they sent to Richard II's writ.⁵⁵ That reply makes clear that the guild was established to be the custodian of the Pater Noster play in which "many vices and sins were condemned as well as virtues commended." The play was considered to be worthy of protection because it was considered beneficial for the "health and emendations of the souls both of the producers and the audience." Supplementing their concern for the play, the guild also maintained a seven branched candelabra (one branch for each of the seven petitions of the prayer) in the Minster as well as a tablet hanging beside the candelabra on which was written the petitions of the prayer.⁵⁶ In 1446, the Pater Noster Guild merged with the hospital of St. Anthony, sometimes called the Guild of St. Anthony, and the name "Pater Noster Guild" disappears.⁵⁷ St. Anthony's is first mentioned in an indulgence of Pope Martin V in 1429 and it received a small bequest of from John Sherwood of 3s. 4d. in 1438.⁵⁸ The papal indulgence indicates that the guild was originally housed outside the walls. However, about the time that the Pater Noster Guild and St. Anthony's merged, a new hall was built on Peaseholme Green. That hall today houses the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research.

The responsibility for the Pater Noster Play was taken over by St. Anthony's. In 1465, one of the chaplains of the guild, William Downham, willed "omnes libros meos de ludo de pater noster" to William Ball, the master of the guild.⁵⁹ The play was to be played in May 1495 but the guild defaulted and was fined an unspecified amount by the city for not performing their play "according to *the* worship of *this* city" and instructed to prepare the play for the next year.⁶⁰ No documentary evidence survives from 1496 but in 1536 the council agreed that the Pater Noster Play "aught by Course" to be performed that year which⁶¹ suggests that, like the performances of the Creed Play, the Pater Noster had come to have regular performances at perhaps ten year intervals. After Dissolution, following the pattern of the Corpus Christi Guild, the lands and properties became the

property of the city. There is no evidence to indicate exactly how this was done, but on 18 December 1548 we find the council stoutly asserting to "Maister White beyng one of the King's resavours in thes Northe parties" that "ther is no gyld of Saynt Antony founded within the said Citie as is supposed."⁶² In 1551 the city undertook a major repair of the hall. By the beginning of Mary's reign, St. Anthony's Hall had become so much a part of the property of the city that it had become the meeting place of the craft guilds "suche as want metying howses" and the council was setting up mechanisms for the payment of the regular repairs on the building.⁶³ Some vestige of the old guild seems to have survived Dissolution, however, since in 1558⁶⁴ and again in 1572⁶⁵ the "Maister of St Anthony's" is requested to prepare the Pater Noster Play for production. The performance of that play in 1572 is the last performance of any Medieval religious drama in York.

c) The Guild of St. Christopher and St. George

The Guild of St. Christopher was established as early as 1396 by letters patent of Richard II issued March 12⁶⁶ of that year. In 1423, the guild appears before the city council in a dispute over a land claim with Robert Burton, barker.⁶⁷ The guild of St. George was established by letters patent from Henry VI issued May 29, 1447. The licence was granted to William Craven, mercer, John Kirkham, John Bell, John Preston, and John Shirwode whose occupations varied from clerk to skinner.⁶⁸ The guild, established with the pious purpose of celebrating divine services and offering prayers for the dead, was also given the essential right of acquiring land. It was to be established in the chapel of St. George by the castle but later that same year we find a combined guild of St. Christopher and St. George building a common chapel at the end of Coney Street⁶⁹ next to the site of the ancient common hall mentioned as the eighth station of the Corpus Christi Play as early as 1399.⁷⁰ The year before the amalgamation of the guilds, William Revetour the deputy city clerk who had willed the Creed Play to the Corpus Christi Guild, willed a play on St. James "in sex paginas compilatum"⁷¹ to the St. Christopher's Guild. Nothing more is known about that play but we do know that the combined guild was responsible for the riding of St. George on St. George's Day (23 April). In 1502 William Tod, a merchant, left his "fyne salett" (a light bowl-shaped helmet) to the St. Christopher's Guild "to be used ever at the ridyng of Saynt George within the said cetic."⁷² The year before Dissolution, St. George's Day fell on Good Friday and there is a note in the city House Book (or

minute book) for that day "therfore thay [the city council] dyd not Ryde with Saynt George this yere."⁷³ This implies that it was their custom to ride with the guild on this annual occasion. There is no other evidence of playmaking or ceremonial activity before the Dissolution.

In 1447, when the two guilds merged, they undertook to share the cost of the construction of a new Guildhall on the river behind their chapel with the city over a period of years.⁷⁴ They also shared a major repair in 1478.⁷⁵ By entering into what amounted to shared accommodation, the combined guild was of central importance in the life of the city for the next century. From 1453 until 1508 when a gap of almost fifty years occurs in the run of the chamberlains' rolls, the guild paid the city rent for "unius parcelle terre iuxta Guyhald Eboracum."⁷⁶ Although the city council regularly met in the Council Chamber on Ousebridge next to St. William's Chapel, there was a second Council Chamber in the Guildhall or Common Hall and it was in the Hall that larger gatherings of national as well as local importance took place. For example, it was here in August 1487 that Henry VII, having seen a command performance of the Corpus Christi play the day before, sat in judgment on the rebel Roger Layton. Layton was beheaded the next day.⁷⁷ The gate to the Common Hall faced on to what is now St. Helen's square and it remained one of the established stations for the Corpus Christi Play throughout the life of the play.⁷⁸ It was also inside the hall that the travelling players performed their plays for the mayor and council from 1527 on.⁷⁹ We can gain some sense of the normal free interchange of the guild and the city over this property through an incident involving William Man the master of the guild in 1529. Man had quarrelled with his fellow guildsmen who had been masters before him and an alarmed council "for dyverse causys and consideraonz" took from him the keys to the Common Hall door and the door of the Common Chamber which seem normally to have been held by the master of the guild.⁸⁰

So much did the guild seem to be an arm of the city government that the city was caught off guard at the Dissolution. On 18 December, 1548, they despatched Henry Mason the clerk of the guilds to London carrying letters from the city asking "whether the said guylds be within the compas of the King's statuts or not."⁸¹ Just in case, they also prudently provided Mason with the authority to "sewe for the preferment" to purchase the property of the guilds.⁸² It seems, however, that Sir Michael Stanhope, the governor of the town of Hull who was at this time close to the circle around the boy king⁸³ with his friend John Bellow⁸⁴ the surveyor of augmentations for the

East Riding had acquired the property of the guild as part of their land-speculation activities. During the spring of 1549, the mayor, a draper named John Lewes,⁸⁵ bought the property privately from Stanhope for £212 4s. 8d.⁸⁶ On 22 June, 1549 the council agreed to repay the mayor for the money he had paid in purchasing the lands and tenements of the "laite guylde of Saynt Crystofer and Saynt George." Stanhope was given an annuity of £14 a year. However, in order to legitimate the purchase, Miles Newton, the common clerk, was sent to London "for the common busynes of this Citie."⁸⁷ He seems to have been successful in his enterprise since six months later he was voted a bonus of forty shillings

in reward for his paynes and diligent servyce that he dyd for the common well of this City in gittyng and obteinyng of the Kyngs majestie at London his grace is lettres patents under the greyt seell of England to have unto the said Corporacon and to their successours for ever all the lands and tenements, closez, medowes, pasturez, commons of the pasture, free rents and all other heredytaments with their appertenaunces whiche dyd belonge to the layte dissolvdyd guylde of Saynt Cristofer and Saynt George in York and also in dyverse places in the cuntree.⁸⁸

The actual letters patent are dated 4 August, 1550 more than a year after the mayor had closed the deal with Stanhope. From this time on all the assets of the guilds and all their obligations were vested in the city.

During the reign of Mary, the city organized the procession, mass and sermon in the place of the guild. The expenses for 1554 include carrying the pageant, the dragon and St. Christopher. They also include 2d. for "a great nale to St christofer hed."⁸⁹ The last record of the riding of St. George is for 1558.⁹⁰

The pattern that emerges in York is that the city council and its craft guilds were determined as far as possible to maintain control of the incomes that had been derived from the properties accrued by the confraternities during the fifteenth century. As far as I have been able to discover, the only major possessions of any of the guilds I have considered that passed permanently into the hands of the king's commissioners was the magnificent shrine of Corpus Christi and the other treasures of the guild. Only one item remains in York from the guild, a mazer bowl that is now among the possessions of the Minster.⁹¹ All the real estate, one way or another, passed either into the hands of the secular guilds as in the case of the Tailors and the Mercers or into the hands of the city itself. But with the property passed also the obligations of the confraternities. The poor and indigent continued

to be housed and fed in the hospitals and, until yet another twist in the history of the nation suppressed them, the plays and ceremonies were taken over by the city council and added to their traditional playmaking role as the producer of the Corpus Christi Play.

4. Abingdon, Berkshire

The story of the Fraternity of the Holy Cross in the parish of St. Helen in Abingdon, Berkshire reveals an entirely different relationship between a confraternity and the civil authorities from those that obtained in York. Abingdon was a small community just south of Oxford on the Thames dominated by its ancient Benedictine Abbey. The townsmen, though commercially successful, had equivocal legal status since their town was not a borough and enjoyed no clear-cut burghal rights.⁹² They had a market during the fourteenth century that was the cause of a longstanding dispute with the abbot who claimed full rights over the town including the control of the market. Eventually parliament found for the abbot and the last century and a half of the life of the abbey was spent in constant tension between the townspeople and the abbot who acted as secular lord.

The flash-point in the relationship was a shared boundary between the abbey lands and the churchyard of the parish church of St. Helen.⁹³ In this way the focus of local concern was centered on the parish. The parish had two confraternities associated with it. The Guild of Our Lady, founded in 1247, seems to be a typical religious guild of the period but the second guild, the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, was quite different. Indeed, it seems to have been the instrument through which civil authority was exercised until the dissolution of the monastery. This is clear from the fact that, in 1520, the Fraternity successfully petitioned Henry VIII for a renewed charter granting the town a three day fair.⁹⁴

The Fraternity provided local ceremony and playmaking that in some ways parallels on a much smaller scale the activities of the city of York and its guilds. In 1437, Robert Neville, bishop of Salisbury, rebuked the guild for having masked men and effigies of the devil carried in their procession on the feast of the Holy Cross.⁹⁵ There is also an antiquarian account by Thomas Hearn that describes the extravagance of the guild in hiring twelve minstrels for their annual feast, some from as far away as Coventry and Maidenhead, whom they paid at a higher rate than the priests. He also speaks rather slightly of "Pageantes and playes and May games to captivat the senses of the zelous beholders."⁹⁶

But the Fraternity of the Holy Cross in Abingdon had far more than local significance. In 1416, letters patent from Henry V were issued to "John Houchons and John Bret and the commonalty of the said town of Abendon"⁹⁷ allowing them to finance and build bridges across the Thames at Abingdon and Culham Reach that would make an important link with Dorchester in Oxfordshire on the main road west. The Fraternity is not specifically mentioned in the letters patent but it is clear from subsequent documents that they or their predecessors were the "commonalty of the said town" who undertook the building project. The importance of these bridges to the crown is clear from the letters incorporating the fraternity in 1441. On October 20 of that year, a licence was issued to a group of men for the repair of the bridges and for the right to found a "perpetual gild of themselves and others" called the guild of the Holy Cross in the parish church of St Helen, Abingdon with four masters and the right to acquire "lands, rents and possessions held in burgage, socage or other service to the value of £40."⁹⁸ The remarkable thing about this licence is its primary holders. The first three named are William Aiscough, Bishop of Salisbury, Henry VI's personal confessor,⁹⁹ William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk and at this time close to the king as well as Joint Constable Wallingford Castle, about ten miles south west of Abingdon,¹⁰⁰ and Thomas Beckington, Bishop of Bath and Wells and a constant companion of the king.¹⁰¹ The rest of the names are those, such as John Golafre and John Norris, who were prominent local citizens.¹⁰²

On February 20, 1484 a second licence was issued, this time authorizing twelve masters with the right to hold land in mortmain to the value of £100 annually "for the repair of the highway leading from Abendon to Dorcastre, co. Oxford, and across the river Thames by Burford and Culhamford and for the sustenance of thirteen poor men and women."¹⁰³ Again, although the secondary purpose of the guild to sustain the poor and offer prayers for the dead is upheld, it is clear that the main function of the guild is to maintain the communication link. Again, the licensees are significant—John Russell, Bishop of Lincoln and Chancellor of England, John de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, Richard III's brother-in-law and like his father before him Joint Constable of the castle at Wallingford and Francis, Lord Lovell (whose principal seat at Minster Lovell was nearby) named in the licence as the king's chamberlain and the other Joint Constable of Wallingford.¹⁰⁴

Although both Russell and De la Pole survived the downfall of Richard III, it is clear that they did not themselves at any time become bridgemasters

in this small Berkshire town. The day to day maintenance of the bridges was the responsibility of the local members of the fraternity. In this way the fraternity functioned as an instrument of local government despite the legal sovereignty of the abbey.

Abingdon Abbey was dissolved on 9 February, 1538—one of the first of the great English abbeys to be destroyed. The Fraternity fell under the edict of 1547. Out of the ensuing uncertainty, however, emerged a new town government. In 1553, an Act of the Privy Council restored “to the townesmen of Abendon of suche landes as, having byn appointed for the maintenaunce of ij bridges and the sustentacion of certaine poore men, were taken lately from them to the Kinges Majesties behoof uppon coullour that the same were within the compasse of thact of Chauntries.”¹⁰⁵ That same year Christ’s Hospital was established in Abingdon taking over the functions of the Fraternity. Four of the last masters of the Fraternity were among the governors of the hospital.¹⁰⁶ During the next three years the townspeople sought incorporation which they received in 1556, at which time two of the same four masters became members of the town council.¹⁰⁷ By this transition the civil functions of the Fraternity were vested in the new town council and the charitable functions in the new hospital. From the accounts of the incorporated town, it is clear that Abingdon was a favourite stopping place for the travelling players following the road west made possible by the bridges maintained for so many years by the Fraternity.¹⁰⁸ In this way the Abingdon town council maintained another activity of its unusual civic parent.

5. Conclusion

The histories of the York guilds and of the Fraternity of the Holy Cross of the parish of St. Helen, Abingdon make it very clear that we cannot generalize about the nature of English guilds and confraternities. Although most cities, towns, and parishes sponsored organizations to support the poor and indigent and the priests who offered prayers for the souls of the dead, there is no other common thread. What is clear is that the confraternities played a central role in the life of English communities in the fifteenth century. Not only did they frequently provide a social focus for those communities, they put in place a system of social assistance that in most places survived their abolition. But the nature of each guild was different and its relationship to its community depended entirely on the social and political organization of that community. After the Dissolution in York the

properties and obligations of the confraternities were simply absorbed by the city council. In Abingdon, the confraternity itself became the corporation. Variations on these two basic patterns can be found all over the kingdom. In trying to understand the nature of English society in this period of radical administrative change, we ignore the place of the confraternities to our peril.

Records of Early English Drama, University of Toronto

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