

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: Chester and Coventry in the 1490s

David Mills

The second half of the fifteenth century witnessed a severe decline in the English economy. Population had been reduced by disease, overseas trade had slumped, which affected especially the hitherto buoyant trade in wool and cloth. J. Hatcher has demonstrated, with abundant evidence, that in the middle decades of the fifteenth century: 'an extraordinary range of powerful depressive forces combined to impose an enduring and wide-ranging slump of precipitous proportions upon the long-term recessionary trend' from which recovery can be clearly established only in the following century.¹ A corollary to this decline was urban decay as local trade slumped. It would seem on the face of it likely that such decay might be mirrored in the ceremonial activity of the towns, but is this demonstrable?

In this paper I seek evidence of change in the sparse drama records of the 1490s of Coventry and Chester² and postulate that the different forms that these changes take in Coventry and Chester may reflect differences between the towns in their sense of civic identity and their attitude towards the future.

Coventry and Chester to the mid-fifteenth century

But first, why compare the two? There was a well-established link between Coventry and Chester. Today we call that link the A51, but it runs along the line of the original Roman road. Coventry merchants both traded in Chester and also embarked to Ireland, carrying cloth, dyes, and wines, and returning with raw wool, yarn, and dyestuffs.³ Up to the mid-fifteenth century the names of Chester merchants appear among the members of Coventry's Trinity Guild and those of Coventry merchants among the freemen of Chester.⁴ Moreover, Chester was in the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield and the ecclesiastical link produced a further consolidation of the two.

Both towns were centres of their particular regions, but they were not alike. Coventry had expanded in the fourteenth century with the growth of the wool trade. By the start of the fifteenth century it was among the largest of the cities in England, allegedly the third in population numbers. But its reliance on the woollen cloth trade made it particularly vulnerable

to the adverse economic climate of the second half of the century. Moreover, it had no outlet of its own by water — the Severn was navigable only as far as Stratford, which gave nearby towns a competitive advantage.

Chester, on the other hand, developed no major industry to compare with Coventry wool trade and was hardly half the size of Coventry.⁵ It was primarily the port for Ireland, but because it faced west, it had limited access to the continental trade, and so was denied the growth available to east-coast ports trading with the Continent. However, this made it less vulnerable to the mid-century trading slump which affected those ports and, moreover, unlike Coventry, it had no local competition.

The two towns also had different administrative histories and social structures. Coventry was the first borough to gain a charter of incorporation in 1345, which placed administration in the hands of the civic government. As Charles Phythian-Adams has shown, the town developed a *cursus honorum* based on two Fellowships which overarched the craft and trade companies — the senior Guild of Holy Trinity, to which its leading citizens belonged, and the junior guild of Corpus Christi, which was the first rung of the social ladder and whose primary responsibility was the organisation of the Corpus Christi procession and play.⁶ Chester's government evolved slowly. Only by the later fifteenth century was authority *de facto* in the hands of a central civic Assembly, and only by the so-called Great Charter of 1506 was its constitution formalised and the powers of the abbot of St Werburgh curtailed. Unlike Coventry, there seem to have been no socio-religious fellowships structuring and manifesting a social hierarchy.

The effects of the trade slump on the economy of both towns have been much debated. Coventry remained a dominant regional centre, despite declining overseas markets. But an indicator of the economic downturn is the decree of Coventry's council in 1495 reaffirming penalties against some citizens:

They woll, ordeyn & conferme the ordennauce afore tyme made vppon such persones that be of substance to bere office in this Cite that woll refuse such offices as shalbe leide vnto them be þe Maire & his Councell that they forfet & pay such peyn as in that ordenenauce is lymyt & imade.⁷

According to Richard Goddard, by the later fifteenth century:

Whilst the city remained the most important urban settlement in the region and displayed considerable resistance in the face of

decline, the scale of commercial activity shifted downwards to a new, more appropriate, equilibrium point. This new, generally sluggish, economic reality could not support a city of such physical size; parts thus withered.⁸

Properties were standing empty, trade was less buoyant. Accordingly, the link with Chester weakened. As the *Victoria County History* puts it:

‘The number of Coventry merchants active in Chester fell after the mid-fifteenth century, reflecting the decline of their own city’.⁹

Chester, though less severely affected, suffered considerable decay. In his remission of the fee-farm in 1486, Henry VII noted the decline of trade and its effects:

And the walls of the same city have fallen in decay and ruin. Besides, the aforesaid city, which of old had been wont to be inhabited fully by merchants and others rich artificers, is so thoroughly ruined and prostrated to the ground that nearly one fourth part of the same city at present is destroyed and desolate.¹⁰

But whereas Coventry remained at this reduced level into the sixteenth century, Chester was showing signs of revival by the 1490s and was prospering in the early sixteenth century, coinciding with its growing administrative autonomy. As Jenny Kermode says:

While most of the larger cities in more prosperous areas were struggling through the aftermath of recession, Chester’s trade was increasing and the population expanding.¹¹

The Corpus Christi Play: Early History.

Coventry saw itself as a national and royal city. As Phythian-Adams says:

The motto of the city since the days of the Black Prince was ‘Camera principis’, and royal receptions to the city harped on this:

‘Welcom, full high and nobull prince, to us right speciall,
To this your chaumbre, so called of Antiquite.’¹²

If Coventry was a chamber of the realm, the civic élite saw themselves as the royal porters at its door. Monarchs were enrolled in its Trinity Guild. Henry VI established the town as, in effect, a Lancastrian capital between 1456 and 1460 and it was the scene of state councils and a parliament. And the city staged shows to welcome its royal visitors, as it did for the Queen in 1456 and for Prince Edward in 1474.¹³

Like other cities, the town celebrated itself in the Corpus Christi and St George's Day processions and the watches on Midsummer and St Peter's Eves. That at Midsummer remained primarily a watch of armed men escorting the civic hierarchy, though sixteenth-century records show that it included a giant (from 1533) and a giantess (1561).¹⁴

It is against this context that the city's Corpus Christi plays must be seen. Our first reference to it is 1392. Our primary evidence lies in the first Leet Book (1421–1555), supplemented by occasional material from the records of the Weavers, the Carpenters, the Smiths, the Dyers, and the Tanners. The Play is often described as the most famous in England. Monarchs came to see it: Henry V, (1416), Henry VI (1451), Richard III (1485), and Henry VII (1487).¹⁵ In 1457 the queen came 'preuely' from Kenilworth to see the Play, performed on the day after the Feast.¹⁶ But our evidence for the Play's structure and content is limited. It seems to have been the responsibility of only the most prosperous guilds and it consisted of about ten pageants, evidently of a multi-episodic nature and of significant length.

A company dispute of 1422 provides our first evidence of Chester's Corpus Christi Play.¹⁷ Our evidence thereafter lies in carriage-house rentals, obligations imposed on companies by charters, and pleas for debt in Sheriff's court. The last have only recently been explored and give new insights into the content and history of the Play. So, in 1422/3 the stewards of the Weavers brought a charge of debt against John Silcock for their 'interludes', in 1447 Thomas Butler, a baker, claimed 2 shillings and 6 pence from his company owing to him for playing a demon, and in 1487/8 John Jankinson, a weaver, brought a claim for 8 pence against a cook for his work in playing a demon in their play.¹⁸ Our sources indicate ten companies involved in the Play in the fifteenth century and suggest that its structure was very similar to that of later extant texts. It was thus more inclusive and comprehensive than that of Coventry but it attracted no royal observers. And up to the 1490s we have no indication for a wider processional year and, even when the town welcomed noble or royal visitors, it did not stage quasi-theatrical tableaux as did Coventry.

Coventry's Corpus Christi Play in the 1490s

The visitor to Coventry in the 1490s would have noticed little change to the city's celebratory activities. Its annual processions continued and in 1498 there was a special procession for the meeting of the Chapter of the Black Monks in the city.¹⁹ In that same year, the city staged an impressive

royal welcome for Prince Arthur,²⁰ which served as prelude to petitioning him about the powers of the Prior and the tariffs imposed on the city by various ports. The Corpus Christi Play too continued;²¹ in 1493 King Henry VII and his Queen came to see the plays from Kenilworth and 'gaue yem great commendacions'.²² Despite economic set-backs, the city maintained continuity with the past and presented to the outside world a picture of a prosperous and ordered town.

But beneath the surface there was change. In 1494 the council decreed:

Dyuers charges haue be contynyed tyme oute of mynde for the worship of the same [the city] as pagentes & such other which haue be born be dyuers Craftes which craftes at the begynnyng of such charges were more welthy rich & moo in nombre then now be as openly appereth ... And inasmuch as there be dyuers Craftes in this Cite that be not charged with like charges as dyers skynners ffysshmongers Cappers Coruiseurs Bochers & dyuers other, Therefore hit is ordeyned that ... all the seid Craftes & other that be not charged to the forseid Charges and them to adjoin to such Craftes as be ouercharged with the forseid pagantes.²³

This ordinance met with resistance. At its October meeting the council claimed that the order was being ignored by:

dyuers self willed persones which be theire willes wold obbeie no other rule ne ordre but after their owne willes grounded without reason which may not be suffred yf this cite shulde prospere & contynue in welth.

By 1495 we see the effect of this ordinance. The Butchers are to contribute to the play of the White Tawers; the Skinners and Barbers to the Cardmakers'; and the Cappers and Fullers to the Girdlers'. The Chandlers and Cooks had already been required to contribute to the Smiths' play by an order of 1494.²⁴

These ordinances reflect both the changing fortunes of the city's trades and the importance attached to the plays for the city's reputation and prosperity. Additionally, the Corpus Christi Fellowship was an integral part of the city's social hierarchy and internal conservative forces were involved in its preservation. But the ordinances indicate that only certain guilds had in the past been responsible for the plays, for the performance had demonstrated where wealth and power lay. By widening the range of contributory guilds, the council gave the wider community a stake in the cycle, subtly changing the significance of the occasion for the citizens.

The 1490s in Chester

The last sighting that we have of Chester's Corpus Christi Play is in a court case of 1491, recently brought to my notice by Dr Jane Laughton. In it the stewards of the Goldsmiths and Masons brought a case of debt against a mason for 6d owing for the performance of the Corpus Christi Play. This record raises the latest date for the play from 1472, the latest reference in *REED: Chester*²⁵ to 1491. In the next thirty years a major change took place. The next datable reference to a civic cycle in the town is in 1521, by which time the obligation upon the companies was to contribute to a performance of the Whitson Play, and the Corpus Christi Play disappears.²⁶

Unlike Coventry, in the 1490s Chester was innovating. An annal relating to the mayoralty of Richard Goodman in 1498/9 reads:

In this yere the watch vpon midsomer Eve beganne/ The North syde of the pentice builded/ Prince Arthur Came to Chester. about the 4 . August before whom the Assumption of our Lady was played at the Abbay gates. 25 August. He made Richarde Goodman Esquier and 29. September he departed from Chester.²⁷

Individual Mayors' Lists differ slightly in wording, but their story is the same. The Prince, Earl of Chester, visited, saw the Assumption play at the gate of St Werburgh's Abbey and honoured the Mayor. The north side of the Pentice, Chester's main civic building, was completed, so that it looked up the Northgate Street towards the Abbey of St Werburgh. And in the same year the Midsummer Watch began.

The annal focuses upon the mayor and the mayoral office. The Pentice was an annexe built against the southern wall of St Peter's church at the High Cross, the centre of the city. The completion of its north side, thirteen years after the report of the city's decay, made a significant statement. The building symbolised mayoral authority. From its windows the mayor could see into every street. The Prince also honoured the Mayor, and through him the office. The institution of the secular Midsummer Watch must have antedated the Prince's visit in the August, but was no less a celebration of the city, and one that stood in contrast, or even opposition, to the Corpus Christi celebration. The beginnings of Chester's Watch represented a statement of civic independence at a time when civic government was being established and the city's fortunes rising once more. On a more mundane level, it introduced a new opportunity for trade.

The composition of the Watch at this time is unknown, but doubtless the sixteenth-century antiquarians who produced the annal thought in terms of their contemporary experience. By 1564 the occasion had become a spectacle, with various weird creatures:

Ffoure leans, won vnicorne, won drombandarye, won Luce, won
Asse, won dragon, sixe hobby horses & sixteen naked boyes²⁸

together with various 'shows' put on by companies. The marching watch of armed men had become secondary, in contrast to the more restrained form the Watch took at Coventry. Even if this was a late development, the seeds of that process were sown in 1499. Moreover, instead of co-existing with the civic plays, it represented an alternative to them, the default position. Each year the mayor had to choose whether to stage the Whitsun Plays or the Show. Is it possible that such had always been the case? If so, then we would have to conclude that the Corpus Christi Play was not simply transferred to Whitsun, but was replaced by the Watch and then, after a hiatus, was revived at a later date.

What, then of the other event noted, the Play? This was not the first time that the Assumption play had been performed before a visiting dignitary. In 1489/90 it had been performed for Lord Strange at the High Cross, which stood in front of the Pentice.²⁹ But one might therefore have expected the Prince also to watch the play in comfort from the Pentice windows. That he saw it at the Abbey gates might suggest that this was not a special performance but that that was the usual venue for the play. The prince's visit coincided with the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, on 15 August. We have no indication of the time of year for Lord Strange's visit. Burne notes that the west front of the Abbey was completed about this time, that it bears a carving of the Assumption and the arms of either the first or second son of the king, the carving being too worn to tell. He speculates that the performance of 1499 may have also been associated with the completion of the building-project.³⁰

The play is mentioned among the list of Whitsun plays in a set of undated Pre-Reformation Banns:

The wurshipffull wyffys of this towne
ffynd of our Lady th'assumpcion;
it to bryng forth they be bowne,
And meytene with all theyre might.³¹

The play is not mentioned in our Post-Reformation Banns and does not appear in our extant texts, so was probably dropped after the Reformation. This is the only instance of a play which was not the responsibility of a craft or trade guild. The Wives were presumably a religious guild. We do not know if their play was a component of the Corpus Christi Play, though if their play was performed annually in honour of the Feast of the Assumption, it might seem unlikely that it would have been staged also on another occasion. The quatrain in the Banns is metrically distinct from the other verse announcements and is free-standing, which suggests that the Wives' play was added to the cycle some time after the cycle itself had moved to Whitsun. That had evidently not occurred by 1499.

Conclusion

So ends my tale of two cities in the 1490s. Coventry was inevitably trapped by its own past success, hampered, despite its economic downturn, from making radical changes to its well-established and socially embedded civic ceremonies. It continued, therefore, to project an image of stability and prosperity through its familiar ceremonies and plays. Chester, in a more buoyant economic phase, with growing administrative authority, was able to innovate and to start a process which would lead to the removal of the civic cycle from Corpus Christi and the development of a secular Show. While we must remain cautious in assigning too much weight to the later antiquarian annal, the 1490s came to be regarded as the starting point of the process that led to the city's Great Charter of 1506.

University of Liverpool

NOTES

1. John Hatcher 'The great slump of the mid-fifteenth century' in *Progress and Problems in Medieval England* edited R. Britnell and J. Hatcher (Cambridge UP, 1996) 240–1 *et passim*.
2. *Records of Early English Drama: Cheshire including Chester* edited E. Baldwin, L.M. Clopper, and D. Mills, 2 vols (University of Toronto Press, 2007) 1; and *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* edited R.W. Ingram (University of Toronto Press 1981).
3. J.T. Driver *Cheshire in the Later Middle Ages* vol. 6 (1971) of *A History of Cheshire* edited J.J. Baguley (Chester: Chester Community Council, 1964–1985) 105.
4. *The Register of the Guild of Holy Trinity* edited M.D. Harris (Dugdale Society 13; London: Oxford UP for the Dugdale Society, 1935) xx.

5. *Victoria County History of Cheshire: The City of Chester* edited C.P. Lewis and A.T. Thacker (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2003) 5:1 67.
6. 'Ceremony and the Citizen: The Communal Year at Coventry, 1450–1550' in *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500–1700* edited P. Clark and P. Slack (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) 57–85.
7. *The Coventry Leet Book, Part 2* edited M.D. Harris EETS OS 135 (1908) 567–8. Hereafter *Leet Book 2*.
8. Richard Goddard *Commercial Contraction and Urban Decline in Fifteenth Century Coventry* (Dugdale Society Occasional Papers 46; Stratford-upon-Avon: Dugdale Society in association with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, 2006) 36.
9. *Victoria County History of Cheshire* 5:1 67.
10. Rupert H. Morris *Chester in the Plantagenet and Tudor Reigns* (Chester: printed for the author, nd ?1893) 521–2.
11. J. Kermode 'The Trade of late Medieval Chester, 1500–1550' in *Progress and Problems in Medieval England* edited R. Britnell and J. Hatcher (Cambridge UP, 1996) 286–307, at 286.
12. 'Ceremony and the Citizen' 140.
13. REED: Coventry 29–34, 53–5.
14. REED: Coventry 136, 217.
15. REED: Coventry 7, 21–3, 66, 67.
16. REED: Coventry 37.
17. REED: Cheshire 47–8.
18. REED: Cheshire 52, 62.
19. REED: Coventry 88–9.
20. *Leet Book 2* 589–94.
21. REED: Coventry 89–93.
22. REED: Coventry 77.
23. *Leet Book 2* 556.
24. REED: Coventry 2–4 (82), 78–9.
25. *Records of Early English Drama: Chester* edited L.M. Clopper (University of Toronto Press, 1979) 13–15.
26. REED: Cheshire 68–9.
27. REED: Cheshire 64.
28. REED: Cheshire 111.
29. REED: Cheshire 62.
30. R.V.H. Burne *The Monks of Chester* (London: SPCK, 1962) 142–3.
31. REED: Cheshire 85, lines 21–4.