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Where Have All the Players Gone? A Chester Problem¹

One of the most puzzling aspects of the drama records of Chester is that there are few references to visiting companies to the town. The index to REED's volume, *Chester*, lists under 'players' only five possible references to such companies. Three are in the expenses of the abbey/cathedral. The copy of an undated account from St Werburgh's Abbey records payment to 'divers messengers and "histrionibus" both of the lord king and of other magnates upon diverse occasions for extraordinary services to the same abbot £13 6s 8d';² 'histrionibus' does not, of course, necessarily indicate players. Three further entries in the accounts of the dean and chapter of the cathedral concern payments to the queen's players in 1589, 1590, and 1591.³ To these we may add the entry in the accounts relating to 14 May 1583 when the puritanical archdeacon Robert Rogers was authorized to give the earl of Essex' players 2s 'when they woulde haue played in Mr Deanes howse', suggesting that they did not perform.⁴ Of the two references to visiting players performing in the city, one is a refusal. A group purporting to be under the warrant of Lord Dudley and led by one Francis Coffen was refused permission on 11 November 1602 by Mayor Hugh Glaseor to perform because their warrant had been revoked by their patron 'long since'.⁵ Glaseor in fact confiscated their warrant. Possibly Coffen came to Chester because he thought the company and its circumstances would not be known. The last group, Lord Harforth's players, is mentioned in exceptional circumstances. William, earl of Derby, wrote on 2 December 1606 to the mayor of Chester urging him to let Lord Harforth's company play in the town hall; the company had been with the earl and were due to return to him for Christmas, and so the request was intended to find them employment within the area; they were clearly not regular 'tourers' to Chester.

In contrast, the comparatively small east Cheshire town of Congleton seems to have been a magnet for touring companies. The town books, rediscovered in Congleton by Alan Coman, show that between 1589 and 1636 the town

was visited by no fewer than twelve named companies, usually on several occasions each:

Lord Darcy's players (1589, 1591/2)
 the earl of Worcester's players (1590-1)
 the lord admiral's men (1592/3)
 Lord Stafford's players (1595/6)
 the queen's players (1597-8, 1599, 1600-1, 1603, 1614-15, 1616-17, 1617-18)
 Lord Derby's players (1608-9, 1614-15, 1615-16, 1616-17, 1627, 1630-1, 1635-6)
 Lord Mounteagle's players (1610-11)
 Lord Dudley's players (1613-14, 1615-16)
 the king's players (1613-14, 1620-1, 1621-2, 1622-3, 1623-4, 1627-8)
 the prince's players (1615-16, 1620-1, 1623-4)
 Lady Elizabeth's players (1622-3, 1630-1)
 Lord Strange's players (1634)

In addition various unnamed groups were also paid in 1592-3, 1631-2 and 1635-6.⁷ Moreover, a single sheet survives from the accounts of Congleton's neighbour and rival, Macclesfield.⁸ On that one sheet, for 1600-1, we have visits to the town by the queen's players and by 'Symcockes players', which suggests that Macclesfield too may have attracted travelling players. So why did these smaller towns have so many visits by travelling players and Chester apparently very few?

One obvious possibility is geographical location. When the REED research is further advanced, it may be possible to trace the routes of these players. It may be significant that both Congleton and Macclesfield lie in the east of the county and on routes from Derbyshire and east Lancashire. Chester may have been geographically off the regular touring track for players. Set over to the west of the county, it was a focus of Roman roads but its position was militarily strategic, as a port for Ireland and the point of entry into Wales. To the north the River Mersey constituted a barrier; crossing meant, usually, travelling northeast to the bridge at Warrington. The main southern route ran to Whitchurch and Shrewsbury, so evidence for Staffordshire will be interesting. Assuming travel from house to house, where would the players go? To the east were several important houses, notably the Fittons at Gawsworth and the Leighs at Lyme Hall. We have no evidence of players visiting either but that is due to a deficiency of records. The Rylands Library has no trace of the household book of Lyme since it was borrowed by Lady Newton for her family history, but her book has tantalizing allusions to

visiting players at Lyme.⁹ There were no equivalent halls in the vicinity of Chester.

It seems more likely that the evidence for Chester does not convey the full picture. There are at least some suggestions that Cestrians had some contact with professional drama, perhaps from an unusually early period if the performance of 'Robert of Sicily' at the High Cross in 1529 was by an outside group.¹⁰ Even more significant is the evidence of the post-Reformation Banns to the Whitsun Plays, undated, though perhaps towards the 1570s.¹¹ As part of their attempt to defend the production of the city's Whitsun Plays they contrast the drama that the Plays offer with what contemporary plays and actors provide:

Of on thinge warne you now I shal:
that not possible it is those matters to be contryved
in such sorte and cunninge and by suche players of price
as at this daye good players and fine wittes coulde devise. (192–5)

The Banns go on to instance the presentation of God in the plays; 'all those persones that as godes doe play' (196) would in the modern productions come down in clouds and only be heard, not seen, as they were in the Whitsun Plays. The term 'godes' might suggest the presentation of classical gods rather than the Judaeo-Christian God. The Banns conclude by contrasting the 'craftesmen and meane men' (203) who perform the plays before 'commons and contry men' (204) in comparison with the 'better men and finer heades' (205) who 'now come', concluding with the self-righteous: 'Oure playeing is not to gett fame or treasure' (209).

These Banns seem to share a cultural context with their audience. They suggest a familiarity with contemporary theatrical developments, scholarly productions devised by educated men, played by skilled players, and performed for reward. It is not clear whether there is a single model in mind. The reference to gods in clouds could suggest indoor performance or royal entry; the reward could be a paying audience or patronage. But the idea of 'contriving' the material and performing it does seem to suggest scripted drama and presupposes an audience in Chester that might be familiar with such plays. The writer might, of course, have been thinking not of professional companies but of other kinds of performance, such as that put on for the two nights' private visit to Chester by the earl of Derby and his son Lord Strange in 1577, when 'mr parvise Scollers: playd A Commodie out of the book of Terence before hym. The Shepheards playe played at the hie Crosse.

with other Trivmphes vpon. the Rode ey'.¹² Parvise was the master of the King's School in Chester. Large-scale spectacle and scholarly classical drama were both known in the city and had sometimes come together, as in the triumph of Dido and Aeneas, devised by Mr Mann, the master of the King's School, and William Crofton, a leading citizen, which was performed on the Roodee in 1564.¹³ And there were evidently private entertainments such as the mask held at the mayor's house at Christmas 1571, which we know only because of an intrusion that led to a court case;¹⁴ it was during the office of that mayor, John Hanky, that the Whitsun Plays were performed the following year in defiance of the archbishop of York. Such brief references suggest that more sophisticated methods of staging were not unknown in Chester, perhaps imported by those who attended university or were accustomed to travelling to London on city business.

The most likely explanation for the apparent dearth of visiting players lies in a tension between populist feeling and clerical censorship of a kind unique in the county. Partly because of national policy, Chester's churches, including the cathedral, were staffed by a vociferous hard-line Puritan clergy who used the pulpit as a means of swaying public opinion, so that there was a constant opposition to profanity.¹⁵ It was that opposition that ended the Whitsun Plays, that sought to reform the Midsummer Show on sundry occasions, and that exerted influence upon the city authorities. It was in the east of the county that pockets of recusancy persisted, and with them perhaps a more relaxed attitude towards visiting players.¹⁶

In Chester the records hint at a popular demand for plays and players which from time to time was satisfied but which seems to have depended upon personal initiative rather than collective public decision and expenditure. The strongest evidence for their presence in the later sixteenth century is a letter written to the earl of Derby by that redoubtable Puritan, Christopher Goodman, in 1583, perhaps coincidentally the same year that the cathedral paid the earl of Essex' players *not* to perform. Goodman, himself a Cestrian, had been the force behind the successful campaign by the city's clergy against the Whitsun Plays which had led to their abandonment after 1575. His letter to the earl now sheds interesting new light on the issue of players and other entertainers visitng the city and on the issue of civic patronage:

wheras this Citie hath costumably bin geven to maintayne sundrye vayne pastance and vnprofitable spectakles as Bayrbaites, Bulbaites, Enterludes, °minstrelles° Tumblers & suche like not beseeminge good & christian goverment, and thervppon consume and waste other mens goods and pyke the purses of riche and poore, and Drawe

both men & wives, sonnes and daughters, men & maideservants from their needfull busines at vnseasonable tymes, late in the night, to heare & behould wanton and vayne playes, not without danger of evell, vsually insuinge such assemblies, only to mayntaine a number of Idell and vnprofitable persons in the common wealth, of no iust and lawefull callinge, warrantizable by the worde, but offensive to god, overchargeable yearly to this common wealth, ^{one way and other} to the some of xl li. *which* might be farre better employed. The inconvenience wherof as it hath byn longe tyme esspied, preched againste publiquely, and confessed of men of Iudgment in this citie, and somme in office willinge and promisinge redresse, yet partly diswaded by some addicted to coostome, and partly fearinge the displeasure of such noble personages (to whom the aforesaide Bearwardes, Players, minstrells, and Tumblers doe appertaine and weare their lyveries) the Citie is very loth to send them away without such intertainment as these vnprofitable and Idell persons desire, rather then deserve.¹⁷

Goodman goes on persuasively to say: 'So your *Honor* would not any of the saide good orders to be stay[n]ed or broken, by any person or persons to you belonginge, for feare of any displeasure to aryse therby from your *Honor* so farreforth as no wronge or iniurie other wayes be extended to any person to your *Honor* appertayninge'. He argues that if the earl agrees that his own servants should not be patronized, the city will 'also be imbouldened to deale a like with other noble mens servants retayninge to their *Honors* for such purposes, tendinge only to their owne private gaine and incommoditie of many.'¹⁸

Goodman says that such visits had been customary, suggesting a regular succession of such entertainers, of all kinds. He particularly implies that the earl's own players were frequent visitors to the city and that the reception encouraged visits by others. It is also interesting that the authorities are said to allow such performers out of fear of reprisal from their noble patrons. Evidently the wearers of liveries were seen as, in a way, ambassadors invested with the power of their patrons, who might take offence if the players were not well received; their visits had political overtones as well as economic consequences – that £40 is very precise. Goodman may overstate his case. While he probably speaks for the anti-theatrical Puritan lobby which inveighed against theatre from the city's pulpits, it is by no means clear that he spoke for the citizens at large.

But thirteen years later, in 1596, the Puritan faction seems to have prevailed. On 8 October, the assembly passed an order

that hensforth within this Citie there shalbe neither play nor bearebait vpon the

Cities charges, and that noe Citizen hensforth vpon payne of punishment and fyne shall repayre out of this Citie nor out of the Liberties of franchises thereof to any play or bearebait.¹⁹

The reason for this is partly unspecified 'inconveniencences', but also the attacks upon such entertainments from the pulpits, showing the effectiveness of the clerical pressure that Goodman spearheaded. But the authorities were anxious to deflect any charge that the city could not afford such visits and therefore empowered the mayor to pay visiting players not to perform – 20s to the queen's players and 6s 8d to any nobleman's players. Again, then, it seems that the queen's players and others visited the city regularly. We recall the payments by the cathedral to the queen's players in 1589–92 and the fact that the earl of Essex' players did not leave empty-handed, but with a somewhat meagre recompense.

How far this order was enforced is unclear. When the Puritan Henry Hardware junior became mayor, in 1599–1600, he banned bear- and bullbaiting and purged the Midsummer Show of its carnivalesque figures; one annal says that he 'would not suffer any *playes* beare Baits or Bullbaitis', as if that was unusual.²⁰ And a deponent in a court case of 1602

beinge demanded whether/ the sayd Iohn drinkewater were att it this [^]examynates¹ howse vpon thursdaye nyght & went with this examynat to the playe saythe he dyd not butt sayth he saw the sayd Iohn drinkewater at the playe aboutes x of the cloke

indicating an evening performance of a play.²¹ Moreover, John Drinkwater himself

sayth he was vpon thursdaye in the after non from fowre of the cloke tyll viij of the cloke in Iohn grenes howse/ & from viij of the cloke tyll a boutes x of the cloke this examynat saythe he was at the play in the cornemarkett place ... being examyned/ what he payd to se the playes saythe he payd nothing

suggesting a two-hour performance; either it was paid for by some sponsor or Drinkwater sneaked away without paying.

In a separate case in 1602 another deponent said that he

went into the Northgatestreete to see a plaie, and left the other three at Anthony Enos his house, and aboute fyve of the clocke came to [his Osts] [^]the same¹ house back againe

indicating an afternoon performance, apparently in the street.²² The deponent left his house at 3:00 to go to the play, which again suggests a two-hour performance.

It is also not clear if the 1596 act related only to plays sponsored from the city's funds. An annal of 1613–14 states:

Alsoe manye Noble mens players and alsoe beeres came to this Cittye, *which* Coste the sayde two leavelookers much money. *which* the did moste willingly paye for the Creditt of the Cittye.²³

These players seem to have been paid not by the city but by the office-holders, out of their own pockets, and the implication seems to be that they invited these entertainers for a purpose. There seems little point in the annal if they did not perform, and it seems to have been considered a mark of honour that they came.

Further confirmation of such performances is to be found in another assembly order, of 20 October 1615, which refers to:

the Comon Brute and Scandall ... incurred and sustained by admitting of Stage Plaiers to Acte their obscene and vnlawfull Plaies of tragedies in the Comon Hall of this Citie.²⁴

The reader here is prepared for something quite draconian but in fact the resolution, when it finally emerges, is rather tame and permissive. It prohibits the erecting of a stage in the Common Hall and prohibits the performance of any play within the city at night time or after six o'clock in the evening. The ban attests to the existence and even the frequency of such performances, which must have been licensed. It is indeed probable that the annal of the previous year indicates the source of the problem.

From the few records that we have it would seem that the city enjoyed a somewhat sporadic theatrical culture which depended upon the inclination of the civic officers in any particular year and upon their ability to resist the pressure put upon them from the city's pulpits. No doubt players did not visit Chester on a regular basis because the city could not guarantee their reception from one year to the next, but that did not mean that they were never encouraged to come or never came. Their visits were simply not recorded in official documents, in contrast to Congleton and Macclesfield. The fact that after 1615 we have found not even these general hints of professional performances in the city may not be significant. Alternatively, it may mean that

the Puritan opposition finally triumphed and that the players were discouraged from including Chester in their tours.

Notes

- 1 Paper given at the session 'Culture and Politics in Northern England, 1', International Medieval Congress, Leeds, 14 July 1997.
- 2 Lawrence M. Clopper (ed), *Chester*, REED (Toronto, 1979), 472: 'Et solutum diuersis Nuncijs et histrionibus tam domini Regis quam aliorum magnatum per diuersas vices eidem Abbati acidentibus 13-6-8'.
- 3 Clopper, *Chester*, 159, 162, 166.
- 4 Clopper, *Chester*, 135.
- 5 Clopper, *Chester*, 177-8. The entry is given under the date of Coffen's warrant, 1595.
- 6 Clopper, *Chester*, 219-20.
- 7 See further, Alan C. Coman, 'The Congleton Accounts: Further Evidence of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama in Cheshire', REED *Newsletter* 14:1 (1989), 3-18. Dr Elizabeth Baldwin transcribed the records for REED's Cheshire collection, with the kind permission of the town clerk and the Mayor of Congleton. The records are at present on temporary deposit in the Cheshire Record Office, pending the construction of a museum at Congleton. The dates given are the accounting years in the town's two Account Books and Order Book.
- 8 Chester Archives (hereafter CA): CR 63/2/341/18 (2 October, 1601): 'Thacomptes of Sir Edward ffyton knight taken the seacond day of October 1601'. I am grateful to the then City Archivist, Ms Marilyn Lewis, for permission to quote from the records held in the Archives.
- 9 Evelyn Caroline Legh, Baroness Newton, *The House of Lyme from its Foundation to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1917), 70-1: 'On grand occasions when visitors of importance came to Lyme, music and theatricals were provided for their entertainment and amusement. Many of the great houses kept their own private bands of musicians and troupes of actors, and these seem to have been procurable when required. "Given in reward to 4 Trumpetters of my Lo: of Pembrookes - iiis ivd" (3s. 4d.). "Given in reward to a piper of Sr Thomas Smith, is." "To my Lo: Chaundos his players, given in reward, 3 plaies - xxviis viiid" (27s. 8d.). "To my Lo: of Darbis players, xxs". "Given in reward to my Lo: of Lincoln's players, xls" (40s.). There appear also to have been variety entertainments: "To the man with the dancing horse vs" and "To the Tomboleres [dancers] vs"'.

- 10 Clopper, *Chester*, 26.
- 11 Text in R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents* (Chapel Hill, 1983), 285–95.
- 12 CA: CR/60/83, f 13v (Mayors List, 1577).
- 13 Clopper, *Chester*, 72–3.
- 14 CA: QSF/26/8, 28 December, 1571, f 1.
- 15 See R.C. Richardson, *Puritanism in North-west England: A Regional Study of the Diocese of Chester to 1642* (Manchester, 1972), especially 17–22.
- 16 See K.R. Wark, *Elizabethan Recusancy In Cheshire*, Chetham Society 3rd ser, vol 19 (Manchester, 1971), Conclusion, especially 130–7.
- 17 Denbigh Record Office: DD/PP/844. I am grateful to the Archivist of the then Clwyd Record Office at Ruthin for permission to quote this document; °minstrelles° is added as a marginal correction in a second hand.
- 18 The earl of Derby, as lord of Man, had eight players and a minstrel brought over to the Isle of Man for the Christmas period, 1581–2 (Manx Museum Library: Castle Rushen Papers, Weekly Accounts 1581–2, ff 6 col a–f 7 col a 27 December–2 January). Since Chester was the usual port of embarkation for the Island, these entertainers would at least have had occasion to perform in the city on departure and return. I am grateful to Mr Roger Simms, the archivist at the Manx Museum Library, for access to and permission to quote from these as yet uncatalogued papers. The condition of the papers does not allow all to be investigated yet, and I shall have to make further visits to the collection to establish how frequently players visited the Island.
- 19 Clopper, *Chester*, 184.
- 20 Clopper, *Chester*, 198 (Mayors List 8).
- 21 CA: QSF/51/55, (20 October 1602).
- 22 CA: QSF/51/58 (23 November 1602).
- 23 CA: CR/60/83, ff 24–4v (Mayors List, 1613–14).
- 24 Clopper, *Chester*, 292–3.