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THE PROCESSION AND PLAY OF CORPUS CHRISTI IN YORK AFTER 1426

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One of the most famous documents concerning the York Corpus Christi Play to survive is the record of the sermon that was preached by William Melton in 1426. In this sermon, Melton urged that because the play tended to keep the citizens of York away from the strictly religious observances of the feast of Corpus Christi, the play and the procession honouring the host should be held on different days. As a result of this sermon, a public meeting was held and the people of York agreed that the play should be played every year on the Wednesday, the vigil of the feast, and that the procession should always be held with due solemnity on the day of the feast itself.¹

Although the two pioneering scholars in the field, Robert Davies and Lucy Toulmin Smith both express reservations about the absolute nature of this decision,² it is generally assumed that after 1426 the procession and the play were held on succeeding days. Unfortunately, such evidence as has survived does not support such an assumption. The evidence concerning the York Corpus Christi celebrations for the fifty years between 1426 and 1476 is scanty. It consists of a few guild ordinances in the A/Y Memorandum Book, a document recording an agreement between the city and the Guild of Corpus Christi, and some account rolls of the city, the Guild of Corpus Christi, the Mercers' Guild and the Minster.³ It is the purpose of this article to bring together all the evidence concerning the procession and the play from these documents which specifically state the day upon which these events took place. From this evidence it is clear that the earliest possible date for an absolute division between the procession and the play is 1468.

The first evidence concerning the procession after 1426 is found in an ordinance of the Marshalls and Smiths internally dated 1428. At that time the Marshalls and Smiths were pledged not only to look after their pageants but also to "uphald thair torches in the procession of Corpus Christi day." ⁴ The procession is clearly held on the feast day in 1428. There is no evidence from this document concerning the day of the performance of the play that year.

However, there are two documents surviving from 1432. The first is the formal agreement between the city and the Guild of Corpus Christi concerning the carrying of the civic shrine in the procession. The Guild of Corpus Christi at no time controlled the procession of Corpus Christi⁵ but took part in the procession along with the other guilds of York. Yet their relationship to the feast was a special one and in 1432 the city acknowledged this by allowing the guild to carry the shrine "*singulis annis in festo eiusdem corporis cristi.*"⁶ Clearly, then, the procession was held on the day of the feast in 1432. But a document concerning the Sauce-makers and their pageant of the hanging of Judas for the year 1432 makes it equally clear that the play was also performed on the day of the feast. The Sauce-makers are enjoined by the city council to walk with their pageant as had been their custom "*in die et ludo Corporis Christi.*"⁷ From these documents it is clear that whatever happened between 1426 and 1431, by 1432 the play and the procession were again taking place on the same day.

The evidence for the next thirty-six years seems also to point to the continuation of the procession and the play as separate events on the same day. There is at least one record concerning some aspect of the Corpus Christi celebration for most years during this period. The records are mainly concerned with two different payments, one made by the mayor for the feast which he held for his council and any visiting dignitaries while they saw the play,⁸ and one made by the Mercers' Guild for hiring men to carry the torches of the guild in the Corpus Christi procession. Fortunately, the records of both the city and the Mercers have survived for the years 1445, 1446, 1448, 1449, 1450 and 1451. These confirm that the play and the procession took place on the same day.

The entry recording the expenses for the mayor's feast in 1445 is headed in the Chamberlains' roll, "*Expensis in festo corporis cristi.*"⁹ The entry in the Mercers' accounts for 1445¹⁰ is "*Item paide for beryng of vj torches apon corpus cristi day ijs.*"¹¹ In the Chamberlains' book for 1446 the expenses are recorded for the mayor "*in festo corporis cristi*"¹² and in that year the Mercers are again paying 2s to have their torches carried "*upon corpus cristi day.*"¹³ Further corroboration that the play was performed on the day of the feast comes from the will of William Revetour, dated 1446, where it is recorded that he left certain properties to the Girdlers' Guild for their play "*in festo corporis cristi.*"¹⁴ In 1448, expenses for the mayor are again noted "*in festo corporis cristi*"¹⁵ and the Mercers again paid 2s for their torches to be carried "*apon corpus cristi day.*"¹⁶ The entry in the 1449 Chamberlains' roll is again headed "*Expensis in festo corporis cristi*" and in the body of the entry the scribe speaks of the

dignitaries who were present "in festo corporis cristi." ¹⁷ The Mercers kept their accounts for 1449 and 1450 together and that entry reads, "Item paide for berynge of vj torches apon corpus cristi day be ij 3ere iijs." ¹⁸ Further evidence concerning the procession for these years is found in the account roll of the Corpus Christi Guild for 1449-1451 in which the masters of the guild account for four shillings spent for the carrying of the cross "ante processionem in die corporis cristi per ij annos." ¹⁹ Finally, an entry in the Chamberlains' book for 1451 records the sum of 55s 1½d paid "in festo corporis cristi" ²⁰ for the mayor's expenses.

There is also evidence of a slightly different kind to indicate that in the year 1443 the play and the procession were held on the same day. The Mercers' ordinance concerning their pageant masters for that year implies that the play was performed on the day of the feast since the pageant gear was to be returned "within iiij days next after corpus cristi day." ²¹ Also in 1443, the Mercers paid for their torches to be carried in the procession "on corpus cristi day." ²² In that year as well the Marshalls and Smiths passed another ordinance reinforcing the injunction that the torches of the guilds were to be carried "in the procession upon Corpus Christi day." ²³

The other records of this period cannot be cross-checked because only one piece of evidence for each year has survived. However, they, too, may suggest that the play and the procession were held on the same day. In 1433 the corporation paid for the playing of the pageant of the Coronation of the Virgin ²⁴ "in festo corporis cristi" and also paid for the room from which the mayor and his party saw the play and had their feast that same day - "die predicto." ²⁵ In 1437, 1439 and 1440, the Mercers paid to have their torches carried in the procession "on corpus cristi day." ²⁶ In 1453, the mayor's expenses are again recorded "in festo corporis cristi" ²⁷ and in 1454 the Chamberlains' roll again notes payment for the feast "in festo corporis cristi" and for the pageant of the Coronation of the Virgin that was played "eodem die." ²⁸ In 1459 and 1460 the Mercers paid to have their torches carried "in processione in festo corporis cristi" ²⁹ and the corresponding entry for 1461 reads "in processione corporis cristi in festo eiusdem." ³⁰ In 1462, a pageant masters' account of the Mercers' Guild records expenses incurred in providing drink for the players of their Doomsday pageant "vpon corpus cristi day be þe way." ³¹ Other entries suggesting that the play was played on the day of the feast occur in the pageant masters' accounts for the years 1463, 1464 and 1467. ³² The mayor's feast was held "in festo corporis cristi" in 1463. The Mercers' account roll for 1466 specifies that their torches were carried "in þe feyst of corpus cristi." ³³

It seems probable, then, that from the year 1432 until the year 1467, the procession and the play were held on the same day - that is on the day of the feast of Corpus Christi - just as they had been held on the same day up to 1426. It is impossible to say whether or not in the five years between 1426 and 1432 the city council did indeed separate the two events. From the weight of the later evidence it is unlikely that the people of York ever did fulfil their pious intention when they agreed to the separation in 1426.

In 1468 there appears the first entry in the Chamberlains' rolls recording the payment by the city for a sermon preached on the day after Corpus Christi. The sum of 3s 4d was paid "*cuidem fratre Augustine predicanti in crastino dicti festi in capillo ecclesie Cathedral beati petri Ebor*".³⁴ It is clear from the Mercers' rolls and the rolls of the Corpus Christi Guild that have survived from the sixteenth century that by that time the procession was regularly held on the day after Corpus Christi³⁵ and from the civic records for the same period that the last civic event of that day was a sermon preached in the chapter house of the Minster.³⁶ The entry recording payment for the sermon in 1468 comes in the regular expense list for the mayor, which also indicates that he and his party had their customary feast while watching the play "*in festo corporis cristi*".³⁷ This is the first real evidence of two special events related to the celebration of Corpus Christi taking place on two succeeding days. Supporting evidence for a change in the pattern of the Corpus Christi celebrations comes from the surviving Fabric rolls of the Minster. These rolls provide a single entry for offerings "*in festo corporis cristi*" in the years 1433, 1434, 1445-46 and 1457.³⁸ However, the roll for 1469-70 notes offerings given on the vigil of the feast, on the day of the feast and the day after the feast,³⁹ indicating for the first time that special events which would bring the people to the Minster were held on more than the single day of the feast. This division appears again in 1473 and 1474.⁴⁰ In 1475 there is a second entry in the city rolls concerning the sermon which is now paid for "*ex consuetudine*".⁴¹

After 1476 we have a much clearer picture of the events that took place in York at the time of the feast. From that year the House Books which contain the minutes of the city council have survived.⁴² On May 31, 1476, the council passed a formal ordinance requiring the twelve aldermen and the twenty-four members of the council each to have one torch carried '*annuatim in processione die veneris in Crastino*' [italics added] '*Corporis cristi*'⁴³ upon pain of forfeiting forty shillings to the chamber.⁴⁴ In this same year the Mercers paid to have their torches carried '*in crastino*' [italics added] '*corporis cristi*'.⁴⁵

It is clear from the subsequent evidence that after 1476, if not after 1468, the play was performed on the day of the feast and the procession took place on the day after the feast. In only one year before 1548⁴⁶ was the pattern broken in the surviving documents. In 1481 the Mercers paid to have their torches carried "in festo corporis cristi,"⁴⁷ and the Minster rolls indicate that although there were offerings for the vigil of the feast and the day of the feast nothing was contributed on the day after the feast.⁴⁸ Perhaps this year the council tried to fulfil the motion passed by their predecessors fifty-five years earlier. The experiment seems to have found as little favour in 1481 as it had before. In 1482 the procession was again being held "in crastino corporis cristi."⁴⁹

To assume that after 1426 the York Corpus Christi Play took place on a different day from the procession of Corpus Christi is clearly invalid. Dr. Margaret Dorrell's reconstruction of the procession and play before 1426 can therefore be accepted as a likely reconstruction of the events as they normally took place until 1468 at the earliest.⁵⁰ It is also clear from the documents I have been discussing that the procession and the play were organized and paid for as two separate events even when both took place on Corpus Christi day. The Mercers' accounts always distinguish between the entries concerning their torches and the entries concerning their pageant of Doomsday. The Marshalls and Smiths speak of their support of their pageants and their bearing of torches as distinctly separate activities. In their ordinances the torch bearing is associated not with their pageants but with the maintenance of votive lights in the Minster and elsewhere. No mention was made of the play when the city and the Guild of Corpus Christi entered into their agreement concerning the shrine. No mention is ever made of the play in the rolls of the Corpus Christi Guild, although there are regular entries about the procession. On the basis of the documentary evidence, therefore, it can be stated that until 1468 at the earliest the procession of Corpus Christi and the play of Corpus Christi were probably two separate events taking place in the city of York on the day of the feast.

NOTES

- 1 For a complete transcription, translation and discussion of this document see Margaret Dorrell, "Two Studies of the York Corpus Christi Play," Leeds Studies in English, VI (1972), 72-5.
- 2 Robert Davies, Extracts from the Municipal Records of the City of York during the Reigns of Edward IV, Edward V and Richard III (London, 1843), pp. 243-44. Lucy Toulmin Smith, York Plays (Oxford, 1885), p. xxxv.
- 3 I wish to acknowledge the kind helpfulness of Mrs Rita Green, archivist in the York City Library, Mr Bernard Johnson, archivist to the Worshipful Company of Merchant Adventurers of York, and Mr Bernard Barr and Miss Katherine Longley of York Minster Library.
- 4 Maud Sellers, York Memorandum Book II, Surtees Soc. CXXV (1914), p. 180.
- 5 The first reference to the participation of the Corpus Christi Guild in the procession does not appear until their account roll for 1415 (York City Archives Roll C99:1 and 2.)
- 6 YCA B/Y, ff. 116d-117b. See Skaife, The Register of the Guild of Corpus Christi, Surtees Soc. LVII (1871), p. 252.
- 7 Sellers, York Memorandum Book II, 173.
- 8 For a discussion of this practice see Dorrell, "Two Studies," 81.
- 9 The phrase "in festo" meant on the day of the feast. If events took place on the days surrounding the feast the phrases used were "in vigilia corporis cristi" (on the vigil or eve of Corpus Christi) or "in crastino corporis cristi" (on the day after Corpus Christi).
- 10 YCA Roll C2:2.
- 11 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53, account of John Calton master.
- 12 YCA Chamberlains' Book I, f. 26.
- 13 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53, account of John Calton master, second year.
- 14 James Raine, Testamenta Eboracensis, Surtees Soc. XXX (1885), p. 117.
- 15 YCA Chamberlains' Book I, f. 67.
- 16 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53, account of John Calton master, third year.
- 17 YCA Roll C2:5.
- 18 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53, account of John Cateryk master.
- 19 YCA Roll C99:3.

- 20 YCA Chamberlains' Book Ia, f. 60.
- 21 Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Dorrell, "The York Mercers and their Pageant of Doomsday, 1433-1526," Leeds Studies in English, VI (1972), 25.
- 22 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53, account of Thomas Scauceby master.
- 23 Sellers, York Memorandum Book II, 181.
- 24 See Margaret Dorrell, "The Mayor of York and the Coronation Pageant," Leeds Studies in English, V (1971), 37.
- 25 YCA Roll C1:2. See Dorrell, "The Mayor," 37.
- 26 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53, account of Thomas Kirk, master all three years.
- 27 YCA Chamberlains' Book Ia, f. 113.
- 28 YCA Roll C3:2. See Dorrell, "The Mayor," 38.
- 29 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53, accounts of John Gyllyot master, first and second years.
- 30 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53, account of John Gyllyot master, third year
- 31 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53. See Johnston and Dorrell, "Doomsday, 1433-1526," 27.
- 32 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53. See Johnston and Dorrell, 28-9.
- 33 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D53, account of Thomas Scauceby master.
- 34 YCA Roll C3:4.
- 35 See, among other Corpus Christi Rolls, YCA Roll C100:2, 1501; C100:5, 1505; C100:6, 1506; C101:1, 1508; C101:2, 1511; C101:3, 1512; C101:4, 1516; C102:1, 1520; C103:2, 1541. See Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D55 for 1502, 1503, 1506, 1507; Box D56 for 1511-1513, 1515, 1517, 1518, 1520, 1521-23; Box D57 for 1524-1531, 1533-1547; Box D59 for 1555-1557.
- 36 See, among others, YCA Roll C5:1, 1501; C5:2, 1506; C5:3, 1508; and Chamberlains' Book IV, f. 73v, 1542. See also Davies, Extracts, p. 248.
- 37 YCA Roll C3:4.
- 38 York Minster Library Fabric Rolls E3/12; E3/13; E3/18; E3/22.
- 39 Minster E3/24.

- 40 Minster E3/26.
- 41 YCA Roll C3:6.
- 42 See Angelo Raine, York Civic Records, I-VIII, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series, XCVIII (1939), CIII (1941), CVI (1942), CVIII (1945), CX (1946), CXII (1948), CXV (1950), CXIX (1953).
- 43 YCA House Book I, f. 19v. See Raine, I, 5-6.
- 44 This was invoked in 1492. (YCA HB VII, f. 73. See Raine, II, p. 89.)
- 45 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D54, account of John Gyliot master.
- 46 This year, the year after the dissolution of the religious guilds, is the first year that the procession of Corpus Christi is not mentioned in the surviving records. The procession was revived briefly during the reign of Mary.
- 47 Merchant Adventurers of York, Box D54, account of William Brouneflete master.
- 48 Minster E3/29.
- 49 YCA HB II-IV, ff. 59v and 60. Not in Raine.
- 50 Dorrell, "Two Studies," 62-77.