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THE YORK CORPUS CHRISTI PLAY: SOME PRACTICAL DETAILS

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The civic and craft records of medieval and Renaissance York offer a wealth of information about the Corpus Christi Play.¹ They contain scattered pieces of evidence which, in recent years, have inspired scholars to widely divergent interpretations of the Play in performance.² But much of the documentation is concerned with the more mundane and practical aspects of the presentation. The records are financial and administrative and, as such, they are devoted to organizational matters. Although they are less tantalizing than references to the mode of performance, the practical details of York's dramatic enterprise have their own fascination.

Because the Play was a community undertaking involving a large number of people, routine administrative matters had to be attended to to ensure its continued existence. Two areas of administration which were of concern to both the crafts and the city council are particularly well documented in the extant records: these are the matters of craft finance for the production and the storage of pageant wagons. Those involved in the organization of the Play had the responsibility of seeing that these practical details were not neglected.

1. *Finance for the production*

a. Sources of funds.

Individual craft guilds were obliged to finance the separate episodes within the Corpus Christi Play. They usually met this obligation with a special fund, called "pageant money" or "pageant silver", which was renewed annually.

A craft's pageant money came from five sources:

- (1) yearly contributions from members;
- (2) yearly contributions from non-members who gained income by practising the skills of the craft;
- (3) special payments made when a member began to practise his craft as a master or when he entered the craft as a full member;
- (4) a percentage of fines levied for infringement of craft ordinances;
- (5) contributions from other crafts which did not own pageants.

(1) Yearly contributions from members.

Members' payments to their pageant fund varied from one craft to the next and there were different rates of payment for master craftsmen, journeymen and "foreigners", i.e. men who were not York citizens.

The Linenweavers decided in 1540 that all masters were to contribute at the rate of 2d. for each loom they owned and 1d. for each journeyman in their employ.³ Members of other crafts did not pay according to the size of their business but contributed a fixed sum per head. In 1475, for example, all glovers were to pay 2d. a year or 4d. if they were "foreign"; in 1478 master mariners were to pay 4d. a year and ordinary shipmen 1d.; in 1500 master cartwrights paid 6d. a year while journeymen gave only 4d. and apprentices were excused from payment; and in 1572, all plasterers, tilers and bricklayers, York citizens and "foreigners" alike, were to contribute 4d. a year.⁴

(2) Yearly contributions from non-members.

The crafts were most assiduous in collecting pageant money from members who were "foreigners", and equally so in extracting contributions from non-members who profited from skills belonging to the craft. In 1485, for example, the Girdlers petitioned the city council for pageant money from non-members which was double the amount paid by members.⁵ The Drapers were also careful in this regard and in 1522 were granted pageant money from anyone who sold "broad southern cloth".⁶ In 1523 this ruling was enforced and nine such merchants paid the Drapers pageant contributions ranging from 4d. to 2s.⁷

(3) Special payments from members.

When a craftsman began to practise his trade as a master in York, he was bound by ordinance to pay a lump sum. Half the amount went to the city treasury and half to the craft's pageant fund. Sometimes the craft regulations were hard on "foreigners"; for example, in 1493 master cappers gave 1s.8d. to the pageant when they set up shop, but "foreign" master cappers paid 10s.⁸ The pageant funds also received money from apprentices when they finished their training and were admitted to full membership of the craft. In 1551, apprentices who had served their time in the Drapers' craft were admitted as members of the guild provided they paid 6d. to the pageant fund.⁹

(4) Fines.

The majority of crafts made part of fines levied for breaking their trade ordinances payable to the pageant fund. Most fines were divided equally between the city treasury and the craft involved. Some crafts reserved their portion specifically for the pageant fund while others directed that it be used both for the pageant and for other general expenses of the guild.¹⁰

(5) Payments from crafts which did not own pageants.

Those crafts which did not enjoy the status of pageant ownership did not escape financial responsibility within the organizational structure of the Play. Such guilds were required by law to contribute annually to the pageant funds of other groups. It was usual for these to be made not directly to the pageant-owning craft but indirectly

through the city Chamberlains.¹¹ In 1477, for example, an ordinance was passed to the effect that the Labourers were to pay 13s.4d. to the Chamberlains to be handed on to the Masons to assist with the Purification of the Virgin pageant.¹² The Chamberlains' accounts of the sixteenth century frequently record the names of labourers designated as "Pageant Masters" who were responsible for collecting the money to be given to the Chamberlains.¹³ This is the only instance in which the Chamberlains kept records of their position as agents for pageant funds, although it is clear that they performed this function on other occasions. In 1517, for example, officials of the Vestmentmakers' craft collected 8d. from every master and 4d. from each journeyman and gave it to the Chamberlains who in turn handed it to the Skinners for the Entry into Jerusalem pageant.¹⁴

The position of the Chamberlains as intermediaries for pageant contributions indicates the interest the city council took in this practical matter of finance. Further, the civic administration exercised considerable control over the sources of pageant funds. All craft ordinances had to be ratified by the Mayor and council. These ordinances included instructions for yearly payments to the pageant fund from members, for payments of money from fines, and for special payments for entry as master or full member of the craft.

Petitions for financial aid to boost pageant funds had to be submitted to the council. When the Armourers, for example, needed pageant money in 1445, they sent a formal letter to the Mayor. They asked him to find them some other means of support because their members were too few and too poor to raise the required pageant fund.¹⁵

Some crafts which found that non-members were profiting from skills normally practised only by members, sought financial support as compensation for such infringement. Formal petitions were sent to the council. In 1505, for example, the Drapers complained of their small membership and poverty and asked that all tailors and hosiers who sold cloth should be made to contribute to the pageant fund.¹⁶

The records indicate that the council had a duty to find support for any crafts suffering financial difficulties relating to the Play. With the exception of the Innholders' subsidy,¹⁷ grants did not come directly from the city treasury, but indirectly from other crafts. In 1554 a craft pageant fund was given assistance from a fine which had been levied on another craft, suitably enough for an infringement of civic ordinances relating to the conduct of pageants on Corpus Christi day. In this year the Scriveners' pageant fund was granted half of a 10s. fine paid by the Girdlers for failing to have their players ready to perform at the appointed time.¹⁸ The money was granted in 1554 in what may have been exceptional circumstances, but many crafts which did not own pageants gave annual grants to pageant owners. In 1518, for example, the Girdlers were in receipt of 5s. a year from the Whitechandlers and Saucemakers, who had previously paid pageant contributions to the Millers.¹⁹ All such grants were ratified by the city council.

If disputes about the sources of pageant funds arose, appeals

to the Mayor were made by the crafts involved. Usually, settlements were reached in the council meetings, but in difficult cases the Mayor could appoint a committee of disinterested citizens to arbitrate. One such case was a dispute between the Marshals and Smiths in 1426. Each guild demanded pageant contributions from the other, claiming infringement on trade. The Mayor appointed a skinner, tailor, baker and glover to look into the matter and both the disputing parties agreed to abide by their decision.²⁰

The authority of the council in the matter of pageant finance went even further. If the Corpus Christi Play was not performed in any year, the Mayor and his officers could lawfully appropriate all pageant money collected by the crafts and direct it to whatever purpose for the public good they saw fit. They took advantage of this privilege in 1535 when the play was cancelled in favour of a performance of the Creed Play.²¹ The city Chamberlains collected the pageant money to be put towards the expenses of a delegation which had gone to London to defend the city's right to claim rent from land in Bishopfield.²² In plague years the pageant money could be taken in and distributed to the sick.²³

b. Collection and use of funds.

Pageant funds were collected each year. The actual date of the collection was a matter to be decided by each individual craft. As the pageant money was available to be disbursed at the Mayor's pleasure in years when the Play was not performed, it can be argued that the collection was regarded as a normal yearly levy. Furthermore, it is clear that the pageant money, which came to be called "custom money" by some crafts in the seventeenth century, continued to be collected long after the Corpus Christi play had been suppressed.²⁴

Pageant contributions were sometimes received by the Searchers of the craft;²⁵ but officers known as "Pageant Masters" usually attended to this duty. Each craft elected two or four Pageant Masters each year to attend to the practical organization of the performance. At the end of their term of office they were to present their accounts to the craft at a "reckoning dinner" which they arranged.²⁶ Like the institution of the pageant fund, the election of Pageant Masters and the holding of the reckoning dinner remained part of the official machinery of the crafts after the performance of the Corpus Christi Play had been discontinued.²⁷

The city council exercised some control over the collection of the pageant money in that they sometimes sent one of the Mayor's Serjeants-at-Mace with the Pageant Masters to see that the craft members paid their dues. Both the Mercers and Bakers have records of a serjeant's participation in this matter.²⁸

Refusal to pay pageant money incurred fines which were levied through the civic treasury. The Chamberlains took a portion of the fine for the city.²⁹

In 1548 the craft of Drapers was forbidden to present its pageant of the Death of the Virgin again. From 1551 onwards, they were ordered by decree of the council to pay pageant money to the city Chamberlains who would then distribute it to whatever crafts

needed additional pageant finance.³⁰ It is possible that the Drapers resented this state of affairs, for, in 1554, four members of the craft objected to the payment of their pageant money and were threatened with official closure of their shops.³¹ The council seems to have been determined to make an example of these defaulters so as to discourage similar wilfulness in their fellow drapers.

Amounts in the pageant funds varied from one craft to the next. In 1535, for example, the Armourers had only 2s.8d. in their fund while the Cordwainers, Drapers and Tanners each had 20s.³² The money was put to various uses: pageant wagons, costumes and properties, which had to be made and repaired, and players, who had to be paid and fed.³³

2. *Storage of pageant wagons*

One annually recurring expense to be met by pageant-owning crafts, whether there was a performance of the play or not, was the cost of storing their pageant wagon. Sometimes this was covered by the pageant funds and sometimes money was directed from the general funds of the craft.³⁴

Some crafts rented land from the civic administration and built their own "pageant houses"; others rented storage space from other crafts. Information is limited as few craft records are extant.

a. Civic revenues from storage of wagons.

The city treasury gained revenue from rents of land on which pageant houses were built on Toft Green, an area inside the walls to the south-west of Ouse Bridge. Some crafts rented a pageant house directly from the city but the records indicate that most rented land on the Green and saw to the buildings themselves.³⁵ Such rents were collected by the Masters of Ouse Bridge.³⁶ The earliest reference to the Corpus Christi Play at York concerns the storage of three pageant wagons. The entry is dated 1376 and is a payment of 2s. for a Toft Green lease. Unlike later rents from the Green, this money was collected by the Chamberlains.³⁷

The first extant list of leases of pageant-house land on the Green in the Bridgemasters' accounts is for 1428. In this year the Bridgemasters of Ouse Bridge received payments ranging from 8d. to 1s. from the Skinners, Dyers, Mercers, Bakers, Goldsmiths and Tapiters.³⁸ The city continued to collect revenue from "pageant-house" land until at least 1626, when the Bridgemasters ceased compiling independent accounts.³⁹

The Mayor and council drew up formal leases for the land on which the pageant houses were built. A copy of a contract between the city and the craft of Goldsmiths in 1420 gives a clear indication of the position of the council with regard to the pageant house land. This lease was to hold for eighty years. It was for a piece of ground next to the wall of the Preaching Friars measuring 4 ells by 5½ ells (i.e. 15' x 21½') on which the Goldsmiths were to build their pageant house. The rent was 8d. a year and failure to pay was to result in repossession of the land by the city. The Goldsmiths were to keep the house in good condition and at the expiry of the lease

it was to become the property of the city.⁴⁰

In 1387 a contract for the construction of a storehouse for pageant wagons was drawn up between the three crafts of Skinners, Bakers and Dyers and Robert de Waghen, carpenter. Robert was to build the house and see to its good repair afterwards. There was an unspecified disagreement about the contract which was referred to the Mayor, and Robert was ordered by the council to honour the bargain.⁴¹

b. Holy Trinity Church used for pageant storage.

Records of revenues from Toft Green pageant houses can account for only fourteen wagons;⁴² and it is clear that a number of other locations were used for pageant storage. The city Chamberlains' account roll for 1396 lists an expense of 4d. for housing or looking after a wagon ("pro pagina hospitanda") at Holy Trinity Priory.⁴³ It is possible that other religious establishments in York were used for such purposes.

c. Craft revenues from pageant houses on Toft Green.

Some crafts derived revenue from storage of wagons on Toft Green by sub-letting space in their pageant houses to other pageant owners. In 1503, for example, the Bakers agreed to sub-let to the Cooks, and an indenture binding on both parties was passed by a meeting of the city council.⁴⁴ The Bakers' accounts show that other crafts rented space, usually at the rate of 1s. a year, in their Toft Green storehouse: the Weavers in 1546, 1549, 1550 and 1551; the Bowyers in 1546 and the Painters from 1565-86.⁴⁵ In later years, when the Play was no longer performed, the Bakers rented their pageant house to unspecified parties and named individuals, apparently for purposes other than storage of pageant wagons.

d. Pageant houses in Fetter Lane and Peter Lane Little.

The Mercers' company had holdings in Fetter Lane and Peter Lane Little where they leased pageant storage space to the Butchers and the Bowyers between 1487 and 1589.⁴⁶

e. A pageant house in Barker Lane.

The craft of Tailors owned a pageant house near Toft Green in Barker Lane. In 1615 they leased the house and some adjoining land to a member of their guild.⁴⁷

f. Later references to pageant houses.

The records continue to refer to pageant houses after the performance of the Corpus Christi Play ceased. This is clear from the Bridgemasters', Bakers', Mercers' and Tailors' documents mentioned above. Further, in 1626, the city Chamberlains received £3.13s.4d. from the sale of the Tapiters' pageant house.⁴⁸ The Tapiters may have had an agreement with the city similar to that of the Goldsmiths' mentioned above, (a).

The documentation of the York Corpus Christi Play makes continual references to the practical details of pageant finance and storage. Only an outline of the major points has been attempted in this article. The overall control of the civic authority is evident from the applications made by the crafts for settlement of disputes and for ratification of contracts and ordinances. The network of agreements and payments is one of amazing intricacy, but it is clear that the city council and the crafts did all they could to attend to practical matters and thus ensure the efficient presentation of the Play.

NOTES

- 1 A complete edition of York documents relating to drama and dramatic pageantry is being prepared by Alexandra F. Johnston of Victoria College, University of Toronto and myself for publication in the proposed series, *Records of Early English Drama*. References in this article are to documents to appear in that volume. I wish to thank Professor Johnston, Professor A.C. Cawley, University of Leeds and Mrs Rita Green, Archivist, York City Library for their assistance during my period of research in York.
- 2 Compare, for example, Alan H. Nelson, *The Medieval English Stage* (University of Chicago Press, 1974), Chapters 2 and 3; Martin Stevens, "The York Cycle: From Procession to Play", *LSE*, n.s., VI (1972), 37-61 and "Postscript", *LSE*, n.s. VI (1972), 113-115; Margaret Dorrell, "Two Studies of the York Corpus Christi Play", *LSE*, n.s. VI (1972), 63-111.
- 3 York City Archives, House Book B 9, f. 102v. All subsequent references are to documents held in York City Archives unless otherwise stated.
- 4 B/Y Memorandum Book, f.140 (Glovers); A/Y Memorandum Book, f.304v (Shipmen); B 8, f.101 (Cartwrights); B/Y, f.229 (Plasterers, Tilers and Bricklayers).
- 5 B 2-4, f.163.
- 6 B 10, f.43.
- 7 B 10, f.63Bv.
- 8 A/Y, f.371v.
- 9 B 20, f.63.
- 10 A/Y f.258 (Plasterers and Tilers 1422-3. Craft portion of fine to pageant fund); A/Y, f.281v (Tanners 1476. Craft portion of fine to pageant fund and other general expenses).
- 11 Three Chamberlains were chosen by the council each year to take over the administration of the city treasury on 3rd February.
- 12 A/Y, f.291v (Latin version); Chamberlain's Book CC 1A, f.114v (English version).
- 13 1523, CC 2, f.147v; 1527, CC 3(1), p.149; 1528 CC 3(1), p.247; 1538, CC 3(3), f.38v; 1542, CC 4(1), f.120v; 1554, CC 4(2), p.193; 1559, CC 5, f.91.
- 14 B 9, f.93v.
- 15 B/Y, f.121.
- 16 B 9, ff.25, 26. No decision was made in 1505, but in 1508 it was decreed by the council that anyone who sold southern cloth must contribute 12d. a year to the Drapers' pageant fund.

- 17 See Margaret Dorrell, "The Mayor of York and the Coronation Pageant", *LSE*, n.s., V (1971), 35-45.
- 18 CC 4(3), f.69v; B 21, f.46v.
- 19 B 9, f.96v. The Millers were granted pageant money from the Tilemakers by the same decree.
- 20 A/Y, f.287v.
- 21 See Alexandra F. Johnston, "The Plays of the Religious Guilds of York: The Creed Play and the Pater Noster Play", *Speculum*, 50 (1975), 57-70.
- 22 CC 3(2), pp.51-2, 127, 153-4; Chamberlains' Roll 6:7; B 13, f.24-24v. Bishopfield was a large open area to the south of the Ouse, outside the wall to the west. See A. Raine, *Medieval York* (London, 1955), pp.243-4.
- 23 This was the case in 1552. B 20, ff.100-100v, 106.
- 24 For example, the Weavers were still collecting pageant money in 1607. Weavers' Accounts E 56, pp.80-1.
- 25 Each craft had two to four Searchers who were elected annually to assist the Master in seeing that craft ordinances were kept, guarding against sub-standard workmanship and preventing outsiders from practising the skills of the craft.
- 26 See Mercers' documents, Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Dorrell, "The York Mercers and their Pageant of Doomsday, 1433-1526", *LSE*, n.s., VI (1972), 25-35.
- 27 For example, the Bakers were electing Pageant Masters in 1771, BM Add. MS 34605, f.339; and the Mercers were holding reckoning dinners in 1605, Merchant Adventurers' Archives, Account Roll, Box 10, D 61.
- 28 See Johnston and Dorrell, "Mercers", 26, 27 and BM Add. MS 33852, ff.5v, 6v, 10v.
- 29 In 1538 three men who made spurs but would not pay pageant money to the Spurriers were fined for the offence. The city Chamberlains took 4d. from each of two of them and 3d. from the other and an undisclosed amount went to the craft. CC 3(3), f.14.
- 30 B 19, f.16v; B 20, f.56.
- 31 B 21, f.63.
- 32 CC 3(2), pp.51-2, 153-4.
- 33 See Johnston and Dorrell, "Mercers", 26-31.
- 34 This seems to have been the case with the Mercers' craft. For example in 1451-2 their account roll lists "Item to be comons for ferme of be pageant hous a yere xij d" under the heading "Expense forinsice et necessarie" (Mercers' Account Rolls D53 H). In 1463, the pageant masters paid for storage out of their own pageant funds, "Item for be farme of be pagand

hus xij d" (Mercers' pageant masters' accounts, D63).

- ³⁵ The Weavers appear to be the only craft which rented a building as well as land from the city. B 8, f.64v (1499); Bridgemasters' Rolls 86:1 (1501).
- ³⁶ Each year the Mayor chose four Bridgemasters to serve from 3rd February. They collected rents from properties on and adjacent to Ouse and Foss Bridges. Any funds remaining after the necessary bridge maintenance had been attended to were handed over to the Chamberlains.
- ³⁷ A/Y, f.4v.
- ³⁸ Bridgemasters' Rolls 82:3.
- ³⁹ Bridgemasters' Rolls 98:3; 98:4. After 1626 all civic revenue was administered by the Chamberlains.
- ⁴⁰ B/Y, f.42.
- ⁴¹ A/Y, f.163v.
- ⁴² The wagons were those of the following crafts: Tanners, Coopers, Fishmongers and Mariners, Chandlers, Goldsmiths, Girdlers, Skinners, Bakers, Cordwainers, Tapiters, Dyers, Carpenters, Weavers, Mercers.
- ⁴³ Chamberlains' Rolls 1:1.
- ⁴⁴ B 9, ff.3v-4.
- ⁴⁵ BM Add. MS 33852, ff.10, 11v (Weavers); f.7 (Bowyers); ff.26-59 and BM Add. MS 34604, ff.4-10 (Painters).
- ⁴⁶ For example, in 1554-5 the following rents were recorded for Peter Lane Little, ". . . and for the butcher pagand xij d and for the Bowyer pageant xvj d" (Mercers' Account Rolls D59 S (a).
- ⁴⁷ Merchant Taylors' Archives. Deed Book, f.13.
- ⁴⁸ CC 19 (2), f.16.