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978-0-521-85669-0 - Drama and Religion in English Provincial Society, 1485-1660

Paul Whitfield White

Excerpt

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Introduction: English provincial theater and religion

In the town of Witney, Oxfordshire, a troupe of players from the nearby parish of Stanton-Harcourt staged a comedy on a Thursday night in February. They had spent the previous fall rehearsing it, made it the featured entertainment of their own parish's Christmas festivities, and took it on tour through the neighboring parishes, before arriving in Witney. When the town fathers refused them use of the guildhall, they set up stage in a spacious second-story room at the White Hart Inn. About half-way through the scheduled seven o'clock performance before some 300 or 400 men, women and children, the floor began to collapse, but so gradually that the audience suspected that it was part of the show. When suddenly, however, the main floor beam snapped completely, spectators fell helplessly into the game room below amidst a cloud of suffocating dust. In the end seven people died. "The Lord from heaven," the local town preacher exclaimed in the aftermath, "will not bear with such grosse open profanenesse in such an age of light as this."¹ The year was 1652, a decade after the theaters were closed by a parliamentary ordinance, and the play was *Mucedorus*, the best-selling drama of the early modern period.

The performance history of this rural Oxfordshire troupe serves as a useful point of departure for a book on the interplay between drama and religion in provincial England from the late fifteenth century to the Restoration.² For the Stanton-Harcourt players were, in some respects, a representative provincial troupe. Like many parochial groups across England they staged plays at Christmas and other feast days in the Christian

¹ John Rowe, *Tragi-Comoedia*, ed. Arthur Freeman (1653; rpt. New York: Garland, 1973) sig. ¶¶2^f. I return to discuss this work in more detail in chapter 7.

² I am surprised how little attention Rowe's account has received in recent theater history studies. However, for brief remarks, see Alexander F. Johnston, "Introduction," *English Parish Drama*, ed. Johnston and Wim Hüskén (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 7–14, 13; and Patrick Collinson, "The Theater Constructs Puritanism," in *The Theatrical City*, ed. David L. Smith, *et al.* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 157–69, 168.

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calendar and toured nearby parishes. The purpose of such performances went beyond recreational pleasure; typically, parish plays raised money to pay for the needs of the local church: repair of the pews perhaps, a new communion cup, alms for the poor. Secondly, the story affords a glimpse into the circumstances surrounding a play performance in a provincial town. Following a time-honored practice, the troupe sought – and were denied – permission to use the guildhall; in the end they found an alternative venue and sponsor, one of the town’s large inns. The tragic outcome is extraordinary but not unfamiliar: as in London, disasters occasionally happened during performances and local preachers certainly seized the opportunity to cite such events as God’s wrath against an evil pastime.

Other aspects of the account, however, do not quite square with mainstream scholarly thinking about provincial playing, and this brings up additional points I wish to address in this study. First of all, the timing is all wrong. Did not the puritan Parliament of 1642 suppress drama nationwide? Indeed, an old assumption persists that drama was in steep decline in the provinces since the midpoint of Elizabeth’s reign when the last of the mystery cycles were suppressed and when the new playhouses opened up a huge new market that drew the previously nomadic professional troupes to the capital and made travel a last-resort option. It is now clear, as Alan Somerset has recently shown, that this view has more to do with an anti-provincial bias in modern theatrical scholarship than with the available evidence.³ Records of Early English Drama research now shows that the number of play performances in the provinces peaked in the 1580s and 1590s and continued strong into the seventeenth century.⁴ The Witney incident described above confirms that in some provincial communities (as scholars have duly noted of London) stage-playing extended into the Interregnum.

Another striking feature of this story is that the troupe which performed a popular London comedy before an audience of several hundred at the White Hart Inn were not professional players sponsored by a royal or noble patron – what we typically think of in such circumstances – but rather a group of parishioners from the countryside. Once again, this challenges the widespread bias – inherent in the term “provincial” itself – that dramatic culture outside of London was backward, isolated, and unsophisticated.⁵

³ See Alan Somerset, “How Chances it they travel?,” in *ShS* 47 (1994), 45–59; Barbara Palmer, “Early Modern Mobility: Players, Payments, and Patrons,” *SQ* 56 (2005), 259–305.

⁴ See REED’s “Patrons and Performance” website at <http://link.library.utoronto.ca/reed/>.

⁵ For this bias, see Somerset, “How Chances it they travel?” 48–49.

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It also challenges a very recent contention that “by the last quarter of the sixteenth century the amateur theater was entirely dismantled.”⁶ Perhaps the Stanton-Harcourt players and their 1652 productions were an anomaly. But this is unlikely; a group of countrified parishioners with no playing experience do not suddenly produce a sophisticated romance comedy; in fact, there is every reason to believe that in this rural area such Christmas festivities were a very old tradition. Certainly there are other examples in the provinces, notably in Jacobean Yorkshire, where John Wasson discovered that a knightly romance called *Canimore and Lionley* was staged in a glebe barn adjoining Methley parish church over four consecutive nights in June 1614.⁷ Staged before “a multitude of people,” the large cast included local thespian “Richard Burton” in an unidentified role.

A related question concerns the chronological marking and periodization of drama. We usually think of provincial drama as “medieval,” even “medieval Catholic,” and thus in serious decline, if not completely suppressed by Protestant authorities. Not surprisingly, until fairly recently, most scholars working with extant provincial play texts have been trained as “Medievalists,” who have devoted most of their research to the drama’s pre-Reformation contexts, religious and otherwise. As we shall see in chapter 1, parish drama did, indeed, thrive in pre-Reformation England, but in some communities it not only survived the advent of Protestantism but adapted to the changes it imposed. One of the problems of periodizing drama is that it tends to narrowly contextualize its nature and meanings within a particular timeframe and culture and emphasize development and decline.⁸ In the 1560s, however, parish drama appears to have undergone a revival in Essex and other parts of the country, and in large single-parish communities such as Chelmsford it promoted the strong reformed interests of the local oligarchy. In some communities, we can trace its continuation through the sixteenth and well into the seventeenth century. In addition to parish drama, the great “mystery cycles” of the larger towns, the focus of chapter 3, have also been victimized by periodization.

⁶ A misguided claim in an otherwise highly astute survey of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century drama in chapter 10 (“The Dramatic”) of James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, Oxford English Literary History, vol. 2 (1350–1547) (Oxford University Press, 2002), 504.

⁷ See John M. Wasson, “A Parish Play in the West Riding of Yorkshire,” in *English Parish Drama*, ed. Alexandra F. Johnston and Wim Husken (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), 149–57. See also chapter 5 for the Simpsons, who apparently started as a parish troupe and went on to perform plays by Shakespeare.

⁸ For periodization of early English drama see Margeta de Grazia, “World Pictures, Modern Periods, and the Early Stage,” in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 7–24.

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The evidence of constant revision of scripts indicates that these large-scale public spectacles were not frozen in medieval time but adapted to changing political, religious, and economic conditions well into the “early modern” period. Moreover, recent performance and reception theories have shown us that if a script had not changed an iota, the costumes, staging, and acting styles may have, and even if all of these remained the same, plays take on new meanings and topical application under changed historical circumstances.⁹ Some mystery cycles, notably those performed at Whitsun in Chester and Norwich, at least in the form they survive in today, did not even get underway until the third decade of the sixteenth century. Throughout this study I emphasize continuity rather than either change or decline in provincial dramatic culture.

A provincial parish troupe staging a popular London comedy for its Christmas show brings up yet another aspect of my analysis of provincial playing in this book: the intermingling of the secular and the sacred. Recent scholarship in Tudor church history has eschewed the “coherent set of doctrines” approach to religion, seeing it not as a fixed entity but in flux, not as an isolated category but interacting with other forms of social discourse and patterns of experience, including the occult, and changing and adapting according to local community conditions. If Eamon Duffy has challenged the notion that folk culture of the late medieval period was invariably at odds with (rather than absorbed by) popular religion, more recently Christopher Marsh and Katherine French have perceived extra-liturgical practice, including church ales and related sports and plays, as an integral part of parochial religious culture.¹⁰ Thus, although the Stanton-Harcourt players staged a London comedy as their Christmas show, that play, *Mucedorus*, became part of a web of interests and activities that scholars associate with parish religion. One of the major claims developed in the early chapters of this book is how intricately connected parish fundraising practices were to religious devotion. Related to this claim is my contention that a range of practices which some carnival-esque and postmodern studies have posited as “subversive” to religious orthodoxy, including Robin Hood fundraising games, were, for the most

⁹ I take up these matters in “Politics, Topical Meaning, and English Theatre Audiences 1485–1575,” in *RORD* 34 (1995), 41–54.

¹⁰ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Christopher Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998); Katherine French, *The People of the Parish* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). See also Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Protestant Piety: 1550–1640* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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part, complicit with the interests and religious values of the established church.¹¹

Thus, with respect to parish and civic religious drama, it is anachronistic to disentangle too rigorously secular from religious interests. I would urge the same with respect to “secular” drama as well, including the commercial plays of the “Elizabethan stage.” Not too long ago the leading historian of Tudor and early Stuart religious culture, Patrick Collinson, wrote about the “absolute and irretrievable divorce” between established religion and the drama once Protestant iconophobia settled in around 1580: “Now religion would only be seen on stage when stage Puritans, like Jonson’s *Zeal-of-the-Land Busy*, were pilloried.”¹² If this merely reinforces the persisting assumption that drama was completely secularized with the advent of commercialism, several critics, notably within the last fifteen years or so, have explored the representation of religious ideas and sentiment on the English Renaissance stage. The focus, however, has been on the religious politics of London and the royal court or the implications of Protestant theology for scene spectacle, particularly within the context of playing and audience reception in the capital.¹³ In the latter half of this study, I discuss so-called “secular drama” dealing with significant religious issues in several provincial contexts: town–gown conflict in Cambridge, Protestant and Catholic households in Surrey and Yorkshire respectively, and professional acting companies on tour.

Rather than differentiate early English drama and related entertainments chronologically (medieval–Renaissance) or generically (mysteries–moralities–folk revels) it makes more sense, from historical and cultural standpoints, to consider them within the local conditions of sponsorship, production, and reception. Thus, I have chosen to organize the chapters of this book mainly along institutional lines. Chapters 1 and 2 take up drama and revels in the English parish, with religious drama the focus of the first and Robin Hood revels the concern of the second. Chapters 3 and 4 shift to the more complex institutional setting of the towns. In

¹¹ I take up these issues at the outset of chapter 2; see sources cited there.

¹² Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 112 and 114. The quote is ironic considering how much Collinson, himself, has done to dispel numerous old myths about Protestantism’s negative attitude to drama and the arts in general.

¹³ Among the most important books are Margot Heineman, *Puritanism and Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 1980); Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 1984); Martha Tuck Rozette, *The Doctrine of Election and the Emergence of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Houston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

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chapter 3, I revisit the mystery cycles and particularly how they responded to the changes imposed by the Reformation. Chapter 4 focuses on a single town, Cambridge, where both religion and drama were caught up in the range of conflicts and engagements between the university, on the one hand, and civic authorities, on the other. My interest in chapter 5 is in that most neglected of provincial sponsoring agencies of drama: governing-class households, with specific attention given to the ecclesiastical estate of Archbishop Whitgift at Croydon, Surrey, and Sir John Yorke's manor house in Nidderdale, Yorkshire. In both cases drama functioned to address important religious issues for those households and their surrounding communities. The sixth chapter takes on traveling troupes. If such companies, at times, were caught up in nationwide campaigns to disseminate religious propaganda at the behest of patrons, they also exploited popular interest in controversial religious issues for profit; and, of course, religion was a powerful weapon in attacking drama and the players' livelihood, itself, in the provinces, as it was in London. The final chapter brings us full circle with a return to rural Oxfordshire for a closer look at the Stanton-Harcourt players at Witney in 1652.

Chronologically, this study begins and ends on a somewhat arbitrary footing. Parish and town plays predate 1485, but my interest is in what happens to them primarily during the Tudor period, and to a lesser extent during the seventeenth century. The chapter on Cambridge spans most of the sixteenth century, whereas my discussion of the house-hold theater extends into the seventeenth century, excluding the provincial masque, which remains a somewhat sketchy but potentially important field for future research. Since I dwelled at length on troupe playing and religion during the Reformation in a previous study, my discussion of traveling players in chapter 6 focuses chiefly on the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.¹⁴ The extent to which drama of all kinds was practiced in the provinces right through to the English Restoration remains a highly problematic question. What we do know is that regional magistrates and justices were still dealing with touring players as late as 1647 (when a new nationwide ordinance against stage plays was passed), that prominent households in the countryside clearly continued to host them, and that parish playing in rural Oxfordshire was occurring as late as 1652. Even if the evidence is fragmented and problematic for the

¹⁴ Paul Whitfield White, *Theatre And Reformation* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), chapters 1, 2, and 3.

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1640s and 1650s, there is enough to merit 1660 as a practical cut-off date for this study.¹⁵

Two final points. First, if this book is among the first on provincial drama and theater from the late fifteenth century through the early mid-seventeenth century, it does not pretend to offer a comprehensive survey nor the last word in archival research on the provincial English theater of the period covered. My focus is on ways in which drama engaged with religious culture in provincial England. Thus, major topics such as touring practices, household theater, academic drama, regional professional troupes associated with towns and individuals, performance venues, national and regional regulation of entertainment, are addressed only so far as they relate to the central concerns of this study. It will be some time before *Records of Early English Drama* completes its series of archival collections for all the counties of England, and therefore much new material may cast further light on these broad topics and may, indeed, modify some of the conclusions of the present inquiry.

My second point concerns sources. Obviously play texts constitute important pieces in the puzzle, revealing crucial evidence about dramatic genre, topics and issues of interest to provincial audiences, conditions of production, and so on, but beyond the cycle plays of York, Chester, and Coventry, few of them can be definitely identified with specific auspices or communities, and the paucity of stage directions and other clues to performance requires us to seek answers for the questions they raise elsewhere. Unfortunately, far too much of what we know about provincial dramatic activities derives from single pieces of evidence, often from documents that mention relevant information in passing or in connection with another topic. Thus, the account of the Stanton-Harcourt players and their performance of *Mucedorus* ending in disaster at Witney is only known to us because Witney preacher, John Rowe, found it to be a fitting illustration in a book of sermons on divine retribution for sin. Rowe's pamphlet falls under the large category of "contemporary comment," which also include diaries, pamphlets, sermons, and legal testimony in court documents, among other sources. They often confirm what we find in the most common (and so far most reliable) kind of source materials, despite their generally non-descriptive nature: financial accounts. These survive for a fairly large and representative number of parish churches,

¹⁵ See Dale Randall, *Winter Fruit: English Drama 1642–1660* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Susan Wisemen, *Drama and Politics in the English Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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town corporations, colleges, and households, although in the case of parochial records, the South offers greater abundance than the North. I have also turned to non-written and occasionally non-printed sources such as maps and pictorial art. A good portion of my documented evidence for this study comes from the Records of Early English Drama collections, but of course, as noted above, important areas have not been systematically explored yet. For Essex and East Anglia, and Lincolnshire, respectively, I have turned to John Coldewey's indispensable unpublished dissertation on drama in the county and the Malone Society Collections by David Galloway and John Wasson (*Norfolk and Suffolk*) and Stanley Kahl (*Lincolnshire*). Much work still needs to be done in the North, notably in Yorkshire, where Barbara Palmer is currently completing work on the West Riding. I am indebted to her for sharing information from her forthcoming REED collection, particularly with respect to the Simpsons troupe discussed in chapter 5, as I am to David Mills for making his transcriptions of recently discovered letters by Christopher Goodman (relevant to the Chester Cycle treated in chapter 3) available at the REED office in Toronto. Indeed, I have consulted a range of yet-to-be published materials in the REED office relevant to my study.

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CHAPTER I

Drama and religion in the English parish

“Places of public resort” is how the Elizabethan divine Richard Hooker described parish churches, and indeed they continued to be the only buildings “intended for the assembly of the entire local community” in England through the late seventeenth century.¹ As such, they were the center of social life and collective memory for most people, who congregated there not just to worship but to elect officials, to attend sessions of both civil and ecclesiastical courts, and to participate in markets and fairs. They often sent their children there to be schooled, they listened to the church bells for various messages, from celebrating feast days, to mourning the dead, to warning of incoming storms. With all this social interaction centered on the church, it was the chief institution through which social identities and groupings were formed. Local people met spouses, made friends and enemies, established business partnerships at the church more often than at any other local social institution. The church availed many the opportunity to serve and exercise authority through its various lay offices.²

Given this unique blend of the social and the sacred, it is no surprise that the parish church served as the setting and the institutional sponsor of a wide range of mimetic games, pageants, and plays. These revels were enormously popular throughout England from the mid fifteenth century (at the latest) through the early years of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, and they continued to thrive in select communities well into the seventeenth century. The type and scale of entertainment varied considerably, from the quasi-dramatic folk games of hocking and hogging to large-scale, open-air play festivals before multi-parish audiences, involving large casts

¹ Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Christopher Morris, 2 vols., (London: Dent, 1958), II, 42. Cited in David M. Palliser, “Introduction: the Parish in Perspective,” in *Parish, Church, and People*, ed. S. J. Wright (London: Hutchinson, 1988), 8. The second quote is by Palliser.

² See Christopher Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998), 27–28.

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of actors, lavish spectacle, and special effects. The occasion for these organized pastimes were feast days on the Christian calendar; plays especially were popular at Christmas and Easter but even more so in a whole series of late spring and summer festivals from the Invention of the Holy Cross (3 May) through Whitsun and Corpus Christi to St. John the Baptist's Day (midsummer) and beyond. They were usually held in conjunction with feasting and other forms of reveling that characterize the "church ale" and, as such, they were part of a money-making venture to raise funds for maintaining or restoring the church fabric, purchasing a new ornament or image, or relieving the poor. Often involving the entire local community as participants or playgoers, parish revels not only afforded an occasion for celebration and festivity, they reaffirmed the parish's sense of corporate identity, extending its collective memory, improving social solidarity.

These parish revels are my main concern in the first two chapters of this book. In focusing on parish-sponsored religious plays, chapter 1 examines their social and religious conditions, circumstances of production and thematic concerns, particularly during the years just before the Reformation through to the midpoint of Elizabeth's reign. Chapter 2 shifts attention to the so-called "secular" or "folk" revels sponsored by the parish. The main focus is on the Robin Hood phenomenon that was so popular between about 1475 and 1550 and on religious guilds, those subparochial groups which played such a crucial role in organizing revels to raise money for their devotional observances.

RECENT PARISH STUDIES AND THE "TRIUMPH OF THE LAITY"

A century or so ago, E. K. Chambers and J. Charles Cox established parish drama as a subgenre of "medieval theater," but it was largely forgotten outside local county histories until the 1970s when the Malone Society collections edited by Stanley Kahrl (*Lincolnshire*), David Galloway and John Wasson (*Norfolk and Suffolk*), and Giles Dawson (*Kent*) demonstrated the sheer scale and variety of records relating to parish revels.³ No

³ E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), II, chapter 21; J. Charles Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts from the Fourteenth Century to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1913); Stanley J. Kahrl, ed. *Records of Plays and Players in Lincolnshire 1300–1585*, MSC, vol. VIII (Oxford University Press, 1974); David Galloway and John Wasson, eds. *Records of Plays and Players in Norfolk and Suffolk, 1330–1642*, MSC, vol. 11 (Oxford University Press, 1980); Giles E. Dawson, ed., *Records of Plays and Players in Kent*, MSC, vol. VII (Oxford University Press, 1965).