

1573-1575

GOVERNMENT ORDERS END OF MYSTERY PLAYS

Chester Cycle Banned

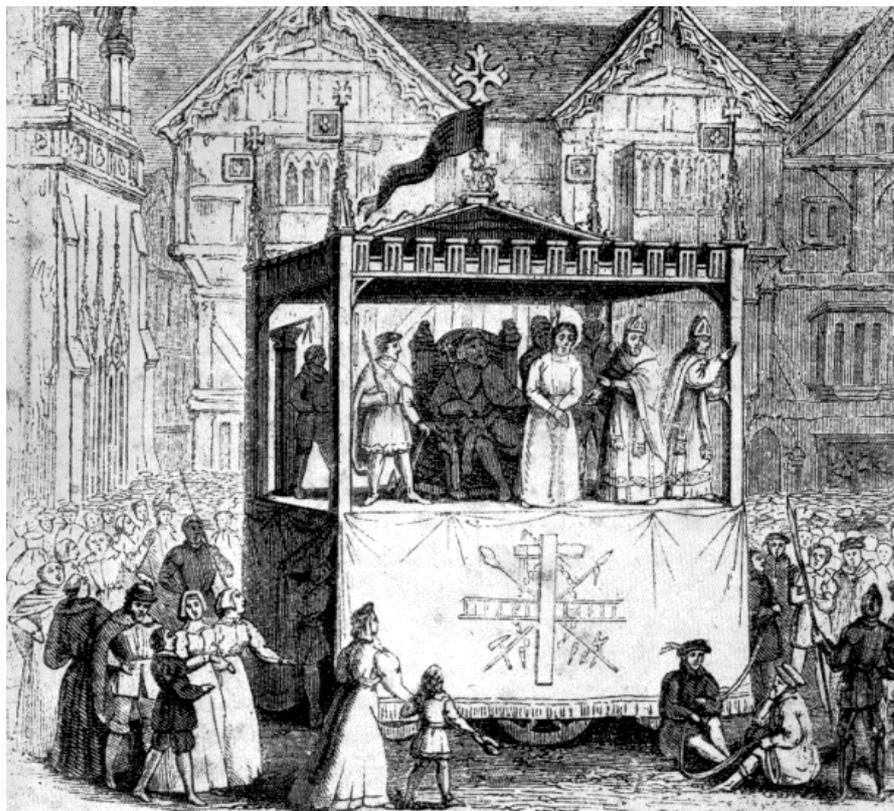
1574: Chester has lost its right to perform its Mystery Plays. The cycle of plays has been performed on high carts with very sophisticated technical effects on Holy Festivals for centuries.

The Craft Guilds of Chester have been told by the Government that their performances are “idolatrous and papistical”, and are upholding the traditions of the banned Roman Catholic Church.

York Cycle is Banned

1575: Following last year’s ban on the long-established Chester Mystery plays, the York Cycle of Mystery Plays has been permanently ended by order of the Government.

It is felt that these performances have become politically worrying, since they extoll the virtues of the “old” Catholic religion, and are a potential threat to the security of the State.



Rishegitz

Centuries of Tradition Come to End

Mystery and Miracle Plays began some 300 years ago as religious stories performed inside churches at Easter and Christmas.

As these performances expanded with extra scenes and even some comedy, the authorities eased the plays out of the Church and into the churchyards. Eventually they moved to the market places and town squares.

The annual performances were taken over by the trade guilds, each of which would take responsibility for a particular scene in the play. (In York, the plasterers were responsible for the Creation, the shipwrights and the fishmongers did the Flood, and the nail-makers staged the Crucifixion)

A “cycle” of these scenes – from the Creation to the Last Judgement – are usually performed on the same day, lasting from morning till night. They have proved extremely popular in York, “Coventry”, Wakefield (or Towneley”), and Chester. Recently they have declined in popularity due to the growth of “Morality” play—allegorical pieces where personified virtues and vices grapple for the soul of man. The main attraction of the new “Moralities” is the depiction of the vices, where a lot of farce and broad comedy has been carried over from the Mysteries.

Since the fervently Protestant Queen Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, Catholic intrigues against her reign have abounded. Her advisors feel that these Miracle Plays are keeping alive the spirit of the banned Roman Catholic Church, and it is politically dangerous to allow them to continue.

A late-Elizabethan illustration of the “high cart” used for Miracle Plays being performed in town squares

Playhouse opens in Newington Butts

1575: Actor Jerome Savage has received the patronage of the Earl of Warwick and has started building a theatre in Newington Butts. Many feel this theatre will be too far from the City to be a success and will never be a popular venue because of the “tediousness of the way”.

Attack on Sunday Performances

1574: Geoffrey Fenton has written that actors “corrupt good moralities by wanton shows and plays. They ought not to be suffered to profane the Sabbath Day in such sports, and much less to lose time on the ways of travail (work)”

Burbage's company - Leicester's Men

1574 : The Earl of Leicester has been involved in theatrical patronage since 1559, and was a pioneer in this field. His acting company has been a particular favourite of Queen Elizabeth. He has now decided to expand his activities - presumably prompted by the Rogues and Vagabonds Act of two years ago.

Private Theatre in St Paul's

1575: Sebastian Westcott, Master of the Choirboys at St Paul’s Cathedral, has set up a private playhouse in the Cathedral precinct. It will be used by the Boys of St Paul’s.

His company has been entrusted to the actor James Burbage, who has plans to develop the work of the players to include more public performances.