

1578-1583

COVENTRY MYSTERIES BANNED

The end of a theatrical tradition stretching back to the Middle Ages



Musée Condé, Chantilly

The only known painting from the Middle Ages which depicts a Mystery Play in performance.

1581: The annual performance of the Coventry Cycle of Mystery Plays has been ordered to cease production. This is the last of the great theatrical cycle-plays to be closed by the Government, which fears the Catholic nature of these plays. The ban ends a tradition in English play performance which goes back to the Middle Ages.

Bear Garden Disaster Kills 8

1583: The Bear Garden in Southwark collapsed during a performance. Eight people were killed.

University Drama flourishes

1583: The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge have developed a flourishing drama tradition in recent years, with the plays mainly performed in Latin. Students at London's Inns of Court are also developing a taste for plays, and here the plays are frequently given in English. Performances in recent years have included "Gorbuduc", "Jocasta" and "Gismond". The Chapel Royal at Windsor has frequently presented plays at Court, though these are private affairs, with no public admitted.

Parson Attacks New Queen's Men Sunday Opening Offer Competition

1578: Preaching on 24 August at Paul's Cross, a parson, John Stockwood, launched a savage attack on playhouses and their audiences. He claims that a single blast of the trumpet from a "filthy player" will bring a thousand people to a theatre, whilst an hour's tolling of a church bell will attract a mere hundred. John Stockwood says Sunday performances are emptying the churches, and are ungodly acts which should be banned forthwith.

The new playhouses are struggling under a two pronged attack: the Government is concerned that plays could be used to disseminate political discontent, and the Church is concerned that plays will corrupt general morality.

1583: The Master of the Queen's Revels, Edmund Tilney, has formed an acting company to be called The Queen's Men. The players include Thomas Wilson, acclaimed for his "quicke, delicate, refined, extempore wit", and Richard Tarlton. Tarlton is a qualified master of fencing and author of the play "The Seven Deadly Sins". He is so popular a comedian that his likeness has been used on several inn-signs.

The new company will play in competition with Leicester's Men, headed by impresario James Burbage. The decision of a senior officer of the Crown to head a company of players is seen as a means of controlling the content of the plays.