

The history of English Drama before 1642 revisited

Alexandra F. Johnston

Records of Early English Drama

University of Toronto

Shakespeare stands astride the drama of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries like a colossus. What he has given to human culture and particularly the culture of the English speaking world continues to astonish and delight. Yet his monolithic presence has long obscured the variety, beauty and significance of the performance tradition that came before him.

He first appears in London in 1592 as young man of twenty-five with just under one quarter of the accepted canon already written. But where had he suddenly come from? In 1971, Daniel Seltzer, in his contribution to *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, wrote,

The drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England was an achievement extraordinary not only for its quality, but for the speed with which that quality in its various forms, seems suddenly to have been achieved.¹

Many would have concurred with that comment when it was made. No one aware of the last four decades of scholarship would make that comment today. Much has been accomplished in those four decades as the symbiotic relationship among three strands of scholarly endeavour –the rediting of all the texts, the performance of the drama in ways that have sought to discover the original staging conventions and the discovery and editing of the external written evidence for early drama – has changed forever our understanding of the place of performance in late medieval and early modern England.

Until the mid twentieth century, the only known and assimilated evidence for theatrical activity in England before the 1590s was a handful of texts – four manuscripts of religious plays based on the scriptures, three morality plays –one clearly a courtly piece but

the other two more bourgeois in their approach, two saints plays and one printed morality play derived from the Dutch (*Everyman*), a few school plays and interludes, some highly political propaganda pieces from the mid sixteenth century and various identified fragments.² With the exception of the Biblical cycle from York (which had been edited independently) all the manuscripts had been rather eccentrically edited for the Early English Text Society in the great push to edit all available Middle English mss for the compilation of the Oxford English Dictionary in the 19th century. The dictionary was to be based on ‘historical principles’ and its compilers realized that a vast number of Middle English literary texts existed only in manuscript. The ‘raw material’ for the great dictionary had to be prepared and so teams of transcribers – among them Karl Marx’s daughter Eleanor – were sent in particular to the British Museum with its great horde of manuscripts to copy them out. The early printed plays that existed only in black letter type almost as hard (indeed sometimes harder) to read than the manuscripts had been re-printed in rather unhelpful facsimile editions by the Malone Society or in John S. Farmer’s *The Tudor Facsimile Texts*.³ Some documentary evidence had also been made available mainly compiled from printed sources by the indefatigable E.K.Chambers for the medieval and Elizabethan stage.⁴

The drama before Shakespeare had also suffered badly in the classroom. Until the middle of the twentieth century and beyond, undergraduate students of English literature were exposed to early drama only through anthologies such as those compiled by J.M.Manly (1897), and A.W.Pollard (1895).⁵ As David Bevington, the editor of the anthology brought out in the 1970s⁶ has pointed out, these ‘collections condescended to their subject as a rudimentary stage in the development of later drama. Manly’s infamous title, *Specimens of the Pre-Shakspearean Drama*, implies a two-fold insult: that the plays are only archeological data with which to construct the stages of the evolution of a dinosaur, and that their only lasting value in such an archeological reconstruction is to discover in it the subsequent

flourishing of more advanced forms.’⁷ In addition, many of the formative scholars in the field, especially in the United States, were staunchly Protestant in their religious views and much of the subject matter was thought to be unsuitable for Protestant readers. Bevington, in his analysis of Joseph Quincy Adams’ popular anthology *Chief Pre-Shakepearean Drama* (1924)⁸ has written, ‘The more this edition moves towards real accessibility to students, ... the more fearful it becomes of scenes and language offensive to Protestant sensibilities...[The] edition turns blushing away from the Crucifixion and Deposition with their vivid icons of the bleeding God.’⁹ A true student of my generation in a conservative department of English, I did not read a Biblical play concerned with anything after the Nativity until I was in graduate school.

Furthermore, this drama refused to conform to the curriculum demands of most English Departments in the 20th century and in many ways still does. When English was established as a discipline worthy of academic study in the late nineteenth century, the prevailing understanding of what might be called cultural Darwinism either excluded drama before Shakespeare entirely, or added it as a prologue (through the anthologies I have mentioned) to courses on Renaissance drama. The canon of English literature was established according to the tastes of the day. It consisted of Old English, Middle English which ended with the death of Chaucer in 1400, and modern literature that was deemed to begin with the Petrarchan imitations of Wyatt and Surrey at the court of Henry VIII in the 1520's. All English literature written between 1400 and 1520 has had a very hard time being recognized in the canon. Even the great and influential Malory was seen as a marginal figure. How much less important were the anonymous religious plays written and performed away from the culture and edification of the court. Furthermore, all that needed to be known about the external evidence for drama had been gathered by E.K.Chambers in 1903,¹⁰ all the texts had been edited and no less a figure than W.W.Greg had written what appeared to be a definitive

article on the subject in the prestigious new periodical *The Library* in 1914.¹¹ A field of very little intrinsic value had been presented to the scholarly world and well documented. What more needed to be done? It was easy to dismiss plays that no one had ever seen performed.

The religious drama of the late middle ages in England did not fade away; it was brutally killed as part of the struggle of the early Elizabethan government to rid the country of anything that would encourage Catholicism and to impose the rule of the godly in church and state. In the course of the campaign, two important prohibitions were issued that affected what could be performed in public in England until 1951. The first was issued on May 27 1576, by the Ecclesiastical Commission of the North. It had got wind of a 'plaie commonlie called Corpus Christi plaie' to be performed in Wakefield and issued an order stopping the performance: The order read in part,

in the saide playe no Pagant be vsed or set furthe wherein the Maiestye of god the father god the sonne or god the holie ghoste ... be counterfeyted or represented /¹²

Although that prohibition against portraying any member of the godhead on stage was never written into the statutes, it was followed by all the Lords Chamberlain (the official censors of the central government) until 1951. The second prohibition was issued by the government of James I. By chance, exactly thirty years after the first bann, on May 27, 1606, parliament passed an act 'to Restraine Abuses of Players'. Ostensibly conceived to stamp out blasphemy, the act effectively banned the mention 'or use of the holy Name of God or Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghoste or of the Trinitie'.¹³ Failure to comply brought a huge fine of £10 with unpleasant entanglement in further legal proceedings. This is why the late plays of Shakespeare – especially *King Lear* and the romances – with their profoundly Christian themes – make no mention of the Christian God.

The second ban was lifted in 1912 and before and during the First World War, several popular playwrights wrote and produced their own plays on religious subjects. But the real impetus – that led not only to the performance of religious plays but also to the renewed

interest in the original medieval texts and their stageworthiness – came from within the Church of England itself. George Bell, bishop of Chichester formed what came to be called the Religious Drama Society dedicated to ‘fostering the art of drama as a means of religious expression.’¹⁴ A key figure in this movement was a talented producer, E. Martin Browne, who, during the twenties and thirties, was at the centre of a group of enthusiasts – some amateur, some professional – that included such leading cultural figures as Dorothy Sayers, Gustav Holst, T.S. Eliott and later Benjamin Britten. Browne and these artists and intellectuals did not share the contempt of their predecessors for the native English drama. The Victorians and Edwardians had travelled every ten years to Oberammergau to see what they believed was a true survival of medieval drama and considered the pious *stasis* of those productions to be preferable to the often bawdy and violent English versions no one ever performed.¹⁵ The members of the Religious Drama Society, however, studied the English plays with care. Sayers’ radio play *A Man Born to be King*, first aired on the BBC in the early years of the Second World War has some of the edgy grittiness of the original texts. Eliott and Browne were close collaborators and when an attempt to perform some English medieval drama for a celebration in Canterbury Cathedral in 1935 came to nothing – because of the bann on the portrayal of the persons of the Godhead on stage – Browne asked Eliott to write him a play – and so we have *Murder in the Cathedral*.¹⁶ It took sixteen more years and the searing experience of the Second World War to bring about the lifting of the final bann.

By the late 1940s, England was beginning to recover from the devastating effects of the War and it was felt that a cultural festival that would take place in many centres across the country would go a long way to help people regain a sense of themselves and their history. Browne was called in by the organizers at York (one of the chosen centres) to advise them on a suitable play. He suggested that they do the medieval Biblical play that had been performed in their own city for almost two hundred years from 1376 to 1569. The idea caught on with

the organizing committee, but the Archbishop of York and other members of the ecclesiastical establishment were worried about the unspoken rule that God could not appear on the public stage. However, as luck would have it, the national committee for the Festival of Britain was chaired by the Lord Chamberlain who happened to be Lord Scarborough, a Yorkshire peer. The York Committee asked the national committee for permission and the chairman of the national committee (Lord Scarborough) in a truly Gilbertian moment asked Lord Scarborough the Lord Chamberlain (presumably in the mirror) to lift the prohibition – and so it was. After almost four hundred years the people of York began to prepare their play for production.

Browne decided to perform the play as a continuous narrative in a single location not as a series of 47 separate episodes performed on wagons in procession through the streets of York, as what external evidence then known for York, seemed to indicate. Although the production values of York 1951 owed more to the spirit of Oberammergau than to the medieval original, the effect of the plays in performance on scholarship in the field was electric. Suddenly the texts that had been studied in the academy were no longer inert religious tracts but living theatre with a surprising ability to move an audience. Professor Arnold Williams of Ann Arbor was so taken by the plays in performance that he established a regular seminar at the Modern Language Association devoted to the discussion of early drama and especially early drama in performance. Productions sponsored within universities sprang up on both sides of the Atlantic and were avidly discussed by scholars at the MLA Seminar. This seminar became a meeting place of the scholars who were beginning to change the face of early drama scholarship.

1955 was a seminal year in early drama scholarship. Two books were published that year. One, Hardin Craig's *English Religious Drama* published by Oxford University Press, is a magisterial work summing up the scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries and was, I am sure, sincerely understood by its author to be the last word on the subject.¹⁷ The other is a slim volume published by the University of Toronto Press of the 1954 Alexander Lectures here at the University of Toronto delivered by F.M. Salter of the University of Alberta modestly called, *Medieval Drama in Chester*.¹⁸ Salter had abandoned the great research libraries in London, Oxford and Cambridge and gone to the local sources – the records of the city of Chester itself. Chester, like York, had had a great Biblical play in the sixteenth century and Salter presented the records of those productions in all their complexity and humanity emphasising the lavishness of the performances and the energy of their producers. The genie was out of the bottle. The participants in the Modern Language Association seminar that had been established to discuss *modern* production suddenly realized there were untapped sources in town and county record offices that might shed light on the *original* productions. Young scholars turned from literary and theological analyses of the plays, boned up on their Latin, learned palaeography and headed for the archives.

Meanwhile, the hasty nineteenth century EETS editions of medieval drama were becoming an embarrassment. The Society set out to commission new editions with modern scholarly standards and one by one they began to become available, providing good texts with solid notes, free of mistaken nineteenth century notions of the nature of the plays. But it was not only the EETS editors who began to examine the play texts closely. One young scholar from Leeds, Peter Meredith, himself a fine actor, recognized that the ‘cycle’ that is presented in the manuscript we now call the ‘N-Town Plays’ did not hang together as a dramatic piece. Besides the presence of a two part Passion Play crudely edited into the narrative of Salvation history and a ‘stand alone’ manuscript containing a play on the death and assumption of the Virgin bound into the larger ms at the appropriate place, Meredith discovered a unique five part play on the childhood of the Virgin woven into the Nativity narrative. As he was studying the manuscript he noticed that some of the stanzas in that

section and only in that section had red dots in the loops of the capital letters that began each stanza. He unscrambled the stanzas and put the ones with the red dots together and realized they constituted a complete free standing play while the rest of the stanzas made a simplified but still coherent set of episodes on the Nativity.¹⁹ Once the field had assimilated the fact that N-Town was an artificial ‘cycle,’ indeed was an anthology of many different plays copied out – in all probability – to serve a pious fifteenth century reader as a meditation text, it was much easier, decades later, to accept a quite recent argument that the third northern set of plays, the Towneley Plays, is in all probability not the Corpus Christi cycle from Wakefield but, again, an anthology written as a meditation text for the recusant Towneley family in west Lancashire in the 1550s.²⁰ The significance of the recognition that two of the so-called ‘cycles’ are actually anthologies has allowed us to find analogies between the individual plays in those ms and the records that have no texts attached. For example, the rich production details from New Romney in Kent of their Passion Play²¹ gives us some idea of the production conditions of the Passion Play contained in the N-Town manuscript.

Our understanding of medieval performance traditions has grown exponentially since the first performance in York in 1951. The city continued to perform their play in the Museum Gardens every three years during the 1950s and 60s²² while the first major production of medieval drama outside York was a modified version of N-Town (believed by its producers– erroneously as it turned out – to be the play from Lincoln) was presented in Grantham in Lincolnshire during that summer of 1966.²³ That same year the *Poculi Ludique Societas* came into formal being in Toronto. John Leyerle, then a relatively new member of the English Department and the Centre for Medieval Studies, had been part of the MLA seminar discussing modern performance of early drama and when he became a member of the graduate department in 1964 he built a component that required his students to put on a play into his medieval drama seminar – the first to be offered at the University of Toronto.

PLS is now the oldest troupe dedicated to the performance of early drama in the world and has taken a key role in the breaking open of the intricacies of early drama performance. Particularly since the mid 1970s, the troupe has taken the lead in basing its productions, particularly of the large plays, on the evidence that has been accumulating from the newly edited texts and the body of external evidence growing from archival research.²⁴

In our essential narrative we have come to the 1970s and it is time to pick up the threads that led to the founding of Records of Early English Drama in 1975. We left the scholars associated with the MLA Seminar heading to the archives following F.M. Salter's lead in their desire to understand the performance conditions of early drama. Little hard evidence of the details of the wagon stages was available. Speculation was rife, with many people arguing from the 'proletarian' nature of the productions that the staging must have been quite unsophisticated. Clearly more information was needed. Stanley Kahrl, who had been deeply moved by the performance of the *N-Town Plays* in Grantham in 1966, went to the Lincolnshire Record Office seeking corroboration that those plays *were* from Lincoln. Lawrence Clopper went to Chester following Salter's lead. Two Canadian Renaissance drama scholars, David Galloway and Reginald Ingram began to research the dramatic records of their native cities of Norwich and Coventry. Alan H. Nelson of Berkeley took a wider perspective and undertook a survey of the record offices known to contain surviving evidence from Chambers' 1903 work. Although Nelson's research led him to the quite proper conclusion that the Corpus Christi or other summer processions of pageants in most English cities such as Hereford and Worcester never did develop 'true drama' from the pageant wagons, he extrapolated from that information questions about the way in which the *York Plays* were performed and put forward a whole new interpretation of the York evidence. This was first presented at the MLA seminar in 1968 and subsequently published in 1970 in *Modern Philology*.²⁵ His new interpretation was based on a computer model where he

estimated the playing time of each episode in the surviving York text, and the time he thought it would take for each wagon to get from station to station, and set up and strike the wagon set; he put this information into a computer, asking how long it would take to perform the 47 plays 12 times. The answer he received was far in excess of the traditional assumption of 17-18 hours. He concluded that the cycle could not have been performed as scholars had always assumed it had been and he turned to a more detailed analysis of the York records to find a solution to this conundrum. Based on his understanding of the records and the ‘proof’ of his computer modelling, he proposed that York had a procession of wagons depicting the scenes and then performed the series of plays once, indoors, for the limited audience of the mayor and council. Many scholars took up his theory.

It is at this point that I become part of the story. My own interest in early drama had been theological and contextual. In 1970-71, I had my first research leave and chose to spend it mainly in York where I hoped to improve my skills in Latin and palaeography by reading manuscripts related to the *York Plays*. While I was working in Yorkminster Library, completely by chance, I became aware of a document of the York Mercers’ guild listing the properties of the wagon for their episode in the cycle, the Last Judgment, complete with double-faced masks for the devils, a hoisting device to take God from one level to another, lavishly painted curtains and no fewer than twenty artificial angels. This was an entirely new document, giving more detail about a medieval wagon stage than had been known before and changing forever the notion that medieval staging was unsophisticated. To make a long story short, I was allowed access to the document and at the same time learned of the interest of a young Australian graduate student, Margaret Dorrell, who, unaware of the new document, had asked to see the known pageant documents of the Mercers. I wrote to her telling her about the new document, suggesting we share the discovery. At our first meeting, we compared notes and found that we had been working on parallel lines of investigations into

the dramatic history of York. I had been working with the material of the Corpus Christi Guild and other dramatic and musical entries not directly related to the *York Cycle* while she was working on the records of the cycle itself. With the optimism of youth, we decided that she would carry on with her doctoral project while I collected everything else and that we would publish it all together.²⁶ We were in agreement that the accumulated evidence we were gathering could sustain only one conclusion – that the traditional method of production for all three large plays in York – the Biblical cycle, the Creed Play and the Pater Noster Play – was in procession from wagons that played and then moved on to the next station. Given the weight of the evidence, Alan Nelson’s theory could not be sustained. Seven years later, on a cold and wet Toronto October weekend in 1977, in the first major outdoor *PLS* performance, we were able to prove beyond any doubt that he was wrong. The York plays *were* written to be performed in procession from pageant wagons following after one another in the open. That was the first major production where archival evidence was tested in performance and undeniably supported.²⁷

But to return to the archival research – thanks to our friends and supporters, Margaret and I were able to get the news of the discovery of the document to the scholarly community through the MLA seminar in New York at Christmas, 1972. At that meeting scholars in the field began to grasp what material might survive undiscovered and also how many people had independently taken up records research. Plans were laid for the next meeting in 1973 in Chicago to bring together those people who were known to be collecting external evidence of performance. Meanwhile, in November 1973 at a conference here in Toronto, I renewed my acquaintance with David Galloway who was working on the records of Norwich. David had also been invited to be a member of the panel at that year's meeting of the MLA along with Margaret and myself and Lawrence Clopper from Indiana who had been working on the

records of Chester. At that meeting we were made aware of the work of another Canadian, Reginald Ingram of the University of British Columbia, on Coventry.

By this time it was clear that there were four locations for which major bodies of performance evidence were under intense research, three of them by Canadians. But we all had a problem. Except for the Malone Society (an old fashioned scholarly society that was struggling to survive and whose main focus (despite the fact that they had published some records) was the publication of Elizabethan drama texts) there was no obvious publisher for what we were doing. More serious in many minds, was the lack of any clear guidelines for editors. If the new editions were to be truly useful there had to be a consistent transcription policy for copying out the often highly abbreviated words and consistency about what classes of documents should be searched or what activities should be noted. We concluded that something new had to be brought into being.

The meeting in Chicago in 1973 also made clear that a project to publish dramatic records could not end, as Margaret and I had planned for York, with the suppression of religious drama in the last decades of the sixteenth century. David Galloway argued that there was a major sub-field of Renaissance drama, the activities of the travelling companies in the provinces that also needed a new and co-ordinated research approach. The dates of the proposed editorial project were, therefore determined as the first occurrence of performance in any given location and the closing of the London public theatres in 1642.

Between 1973 and 1975, I worked closely with David Galloway and then with Anthony Petti a brilliant palaeographer from Calgary who had joined the group to put together a proposal for a project that would, in the words of REED' 'mission statement', 'locate, transcribe and publish systematically all surviving external evidence of dramatic ceremonial and minstrel activity in Great Britain before 1642'. We secured the interest of University of Toronto Press as our publisher and, in February 1975, were able to convene a

meeting in Toronto of all the key players. The most important and far-reaching decision made at that first meeting was to agree to what have become the REED ‘Guidelines for Transcription’. At the end of the meeting, I was instructed to apply to the then Canada Council first for a personal grant for York as a pilot project and then to proceed to apply in the newly announced Major Editorial Grant competition for the proposed series. The most important result of the awarding of the personal grant was the ability to hire research staff. It was at this time that Sally-Beth MacLean – the scholar who has guided the editorial policy of REED ever since – joined us. When the second, five-year Editorial grant was awarded in late 1976, the project was firmly established – at least academically. Our financial security is still a work in progress.

Thirty four years later REED has become the essential ‘third stream’ to the two streams of text and performance that we have been tracing. REED has been called ‘one of the miracles of modern scholarship.’²⁸ As we have seen, REED began as a group of theatre historians who wanted to know the circumstances in which medieval and early modern English drama was created and produced, but it has done much more. Over the last thirty-four years, we have been gathering and editing the external evidence that survives about how the plays were performed – who controlled them, who performed them, what they cost, what the costumes and stages were like and all sorts of other details. And much to our surprise, we have stumbled on a rich vein of evidence that helps to advance our understanding of the social and religious history of a period of profound change. The evidence is to be found in official minute books, accounts, court cases, wills, and notebooks from cities, towns, parishes, great houses (both lay and monastic), bishop’s registers and eye witness accounts.

The most difficult misunderstandings to eradicate about playmaking before the professional theatres began to appear in London in 1575 are that it was amateurish and that it was transgressive. Although there was continual mixing of professional and non-professional

performers it was anything but amateurish and although there are transgressive, satiric and scatological elements in the drama they are carefully controlled. Mimetic performance was used to teach, to celebrate, to advance intellectual debate especially in religious matters and to make political points. Let me start with an example from York that, in the late 15th century, was still the second city in the kingdom. A year after his victory at Bosworth Field in 1485, Henry VII went in progress through his new kingdom. The Royal Entry consisting of dramatic scenes played from pageant wagons prepared for him by the city of York resonated with political overtones. Richard III, dead on the field in Bosworth, had lived for many years in York and had been a vital part of its life. In 1485, a contingent of soldiers had been on its way south from York to fight for Richard when news came of his defeat and death. They had returned home and recorded in the official minutes of the city ‘... that King Richard, late lawfully reigning over us, was, through grete treason...pitiously slane and murderd, to the grete hevyness of this Citie’.²⁹ In 1486, realizing they had need to impress the new king of their loyalty, they hired Henry Hudson, a clerical poet, to write the verses for an elaborate series of pageants to be performed as Henry passed through the streets of York. They presented the most spectacular and expensive dramatic compliment to the king they could devise, pouring the expertise of over a century of civic drama in to the production. As a finale the Virgin herself appeared ‘commiying frome hevin’ and after her speech she ascended ‘ayene into heven wit angell sang and yer schall it snaw by craft made of waffrons in the maner of Snaw’.³⁰

To seek to impress the new king through drama and spectacle was not unusual in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Far from being mere entertainments, dramatic presentations were integral parts of religious and political discourse. Christian theology, biblical history and moral rectitude were taught through drama; rulers were advised through drama and important issues of state such as Henry VIII’s desire to sell ecclesiastical land,

James V of Scotland's attitude to the Reformation and Elizabeth's marriage plans were discussed obliquely through drama in the anonymous *Godly Queen Hester* (1529), David Lindsay's *Ane Satire of the Thre Estates* (1540) and Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's *Gorboduc* (1560). This last one is of particular interest. A recent discovery of an eye witness account of the performance performed for the queen at the Inner Temple in 1561 makes it clear that, although the text is the one that was printed and became part of Elizabethan discourse about good government, the dumb shows were quite different from the ones in the printed text. The message they clearly conveyed to Elizabeth from Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, who paid for the production, was that she should marry him and not the King of Sweden who was parliament's choice at the time.³¹

Life in late medieval and early Tudor Britain was one of ceremony and display. Processions and rituals, both religious and secular marked the year as ancient customs with symbolic orders of precedence were accompanied by music, banners and the processing of pageants and ritual objects. All these activities had mimetic components. The mass itself was often supplemented by what has come to be studied as liturgical drama. Parishes held processions of prophets as part of the late Lenten ceremonies that came to involve costumes and beards. Lords of Misrule to preside over festive seasons were elected in court and parish and had their ecclesiastical counter-parts in the election of choir boys as 'Boy Bishops' to rule the community for a day. Masking, mumming, and disguising took place at all levels of society. Such events were part of the life of the court, the cathedral, the university, the great secular and ecclesiastical households, the towns and even the villages. This is the evidence that the REED project is contributing to the new understanding of drama before Shakespeare.

The traditions of performance fall into three major categories – large scale community drama that had a strong didactic component based in cities, towns and parishes, sometimes hand in hand with a local monastic house; smaller adaptable plays performed by travelling

companies; and the traditional spring time festive celebrations that involved minstrels, morris dancers, may poles and wandering entertainers. The last category fed into the other two providing professional instrumentalists and singers who could be hired to be part of what we would today call 'true drama'.

We have been slow to recognize the wide spread nature of the dramatic tradition because so few texts have survived from England and, until the research of the REED project made it clear how ubiquitous the performance tradition was, scholars had no sense of its context. We have also been greatly helped by the work that has been done in the last generation on the cultural and social history of the fifteenth century. Earlier historians seem to have had difficulty coming to terms with a period that had no apparent cultural centre. Just as the literature of the fifteenth century was ignored so were the social and religious changes. Chaucer belonged to a stable court. He died just as Henry IV usurped the throne and ushered in a century when the legitimacy of the ruler was questioned by one or another powerful faction. The next truly legitimate king was Henry VIII (whose Yorkist mother made up for the usurping Lancastrian blood he inherited from his father) and literary historians chose to re-start their study of literature with his court. Social, cultural and religious historians had no such markers and although the machinations of the Wars of the Roses and their political consequences were well documented, it was not until the last fifty years that the society and culture that survived the struggles of the aristocracy has been analysed and its characteristics identified. The dramatic tradition that I am talking about is quintessentially fifteenth century, although its essential shape was established in the fourteenth century. The Biblical and moral plays were part of the main stream of the religious life of the English church from the time of Wycliffe. Affective piety, where the emotional side of religious experience was emphasized, is everywhere in the religious poetry and prose of the 15th century and finds its communal

expression in the religious drama that was produced often by the cooperative enterprise of the secular and religious authorities.³²

Social and cultural history is not easily divided into neat boxes – it is messy and spills over time and varies from place to place. The ‘box’ that nineteenth century literary scholars created could not contain the popular literature of the fifteenth century (including the plays) because that literature continued to be popular into the sixteenth century mixing with new influences from the continent, shifting and changing but definitely not conforming to the artificial time imposed on it by later scholarship.

The religious drama continued to be performed in the sixteenth century. Some disappears at the time of the Henrician reformation but much of it was still being performed in the early years of Elizabeth. Shakespeare probably saw the Biblical plays performed in Coventry when he was a child. The cities towns and parishes that performed the plays responded to the changing religious attitudes of the state by prudently not performing them when the Protestants were in ascendancy or adapting them to remove the most offensive expressions of Catholicism only to exuberantly revive them when the Catholics had the upper hand.³³ Far from dwindling away through lack of interest or economic hardship they were systematically suppressed during the late 1560s and 1570s by an Elizabethan government at last sure enough of itself to move against these survivals of the Catholic past.³⁴ The men surrounding Elizabeth, men such as William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Robert Dudley earl of Leicester, Henry Hastings earl of Huntingdon, Edmund Grindal, archbishop of York and many lesser officials took seriously the role of the queen as head of both church and state. For them, the Catholic threat was both a threat to their deepest personal convictions and to the stability of the state. They believed the continuing performance of these plays provided opportunity for expressions of Catholic solidarity that, in the words of one Protestant divine, could only bring ‘peril and danger to her majesty’. But, however the state viewed the content

of these plays, the performance traditions of this drama were still living traditions even as the first professional theatres were opening in London.

The morality plays – those that were built around the ‘psychomachia’ of the struggle of good and evil for the soul of an individual – and plays portraying the lives of the saints were also performed by communities of lay and clerical producers. Some of the moralities took on political overtones. David Klausner has suggested that the lavish play of *Wisdom* associated with the abbey of Bury St Edmunds is built on ‘modules’. The surviving text has a specific satire of the fifteenth judicial system but, as Klausner has shown, that part of the play could be replaced with a satire on the church, the court, the military depending on the audience.³⁵ The play of *Mankind*, which was probably a travelling play, in the form that has survived has a very specific satire on four named individuals whom we know were in the following of Edward IV. From the reference to ‘no king’ the performance represented in the text can be placed in Cambridgeshire and dated to Shrovetide 1471 during the seven months in 1470-71 when the followers of Henry VI had forced Edward briefly into exile.³⁶ Virtually no secular plays survive from the early fifteenth century but that there was a flourishing secular dramatic tradition is clear from such plays as Henry Medwall’s *Fulgens and Lucrece* performed in the household of Cardinal Morton in the 1490s.³⁷ The sophisticated metatheatrical banter of two apparent members of the audience (named only ‘A’ and ‘B’) who eventually become part of the play argues a rich and subtle tradition of playmaking that we are only now beginning to recognize. The courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII secularized the religious morality structure as ‘advice to princes’ in such plays as Skelton’s *Magnificence* and in schools and universities the form was modified to become ‘advice to the scholar’ in such plays as *Wit and Science* where the central figure is a scholar fought over by ‘Lady Science’ and ‘Ignorance’ and must defeat the Giant Tediumness. But the performance traditions remained the same. Like

most of their fifteenth century counterparts they were written to be performed in the neutral space of a great hall as part of the entertainment at dinner.

Travelling players were long thought to be a phenomenon of the late sixteenth century professional companies who (as it is erroneously thought) reluctantly left London to tour the countryside and endure the hardships of provincial life. But records of itinerant players are found in the earliest surviving records of towns, monasteries and gentry and noble houses. Sometimes they are free lancers who appear in the records as ‘a minstrel’ or ‘a player from Wakefield’³⁸ but, more frequently, they appear as the players of a local or national figure of political and social importance. Some scholars have speculated that they were also spies for their masters moving from town to abbey to aristocratic or gentry households testing the political winds. A chance survival of ‘the paper books of the said accountants’ for York in the years 1446-8 where the individual payments are recorded rather than summarized in a single payment ‘to minstrels and lords’ servants’ illustrates the ubiquity of travelling entertainers and may also support the suggestion that the players did more than perform for their patrons.³⁹ 1446-8 were seminal years in the unfortunate reign of Henry VI as the powerful noblemen who had controlled the king since his childhood grew old and were being replaced by more ruthless individuals anxious to exploit the situation at court and the disenchantment with the unwinnable war in France. During those three years we have payments recorded to more than 100 retained entertainers performing in York serving the wide spread of masters from the king down to local knights, including high-ranking clergy. These include the king himself, his cousin Edmund Beaufort, count of Mortain and later duke of Somerset, his uncle Humphrey, duke of Gloucester (the Duke Humphrey of the Bodleian Library) soon to die at Bury in mysterious circumstances, various members of the powerful northern Neville family and Richard, duke of York who had married a Neville and would be the father of Edward IV, Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, James Fiennes, Lord Saye and Sele spectacularly murdered in London during the Cade rebellion

in 1450 and William de la Pole, duke of Suffolk, beheaded as he went into exile earlier that same year. We do not know if the retained entertainers of bitter enemies were ever in York or anywhere else on the established route at the same time but their presence together in these extraordinary lists is suggestive. The repertoires of these troupes were moralities and interludes, plays with few props and costumes that relied on the words more than the spectacle to please their audience.

We know that Hamlet was well acquainted with the ways of travelling players. After he has indulged himself with the players come to Elsinore in Act 2 scene 2 of the play, reciting long passages of poetry to their mutual delight, Hamlet, as almost an after thought as he is sending them out with Polonius, says,

HAMLET [*to PLAYERS*] ... We'll hear a play tomorrow. Dost thou hear me, old friend? Can you play the murder of Gonzago?

PLAYERS Ay, my lord.

HAMLET We'll ha't tomorrow night. You could for a need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines which I would set down and insert in't, could you not?

PLAYERS Ay, my lord.

HAMLET Very well. Follow that lord, and look you mock him not.⁴⁰

Here Hamlet is asking the players to alter their text, to speak lines of his devising so that he can 'catch the conscience of the king'. At the beginning of *The Taming of the Shrew*, a company similarly well known to the householder agrees to pretend to be the personal players of the drunken Sly. Players could be used to further the ends of their employers and plays altered to make political or satirical points or merely indulge the whim of the patrons. In this way they became part of the life of the community or household in which they found themselves rather than separate 'artists' presenting their artifice for a fee and departing. They could also be used as deliberate instruments of state policy as they were for much of the central years of the sixteenth century.

In the early days of the Henrician reformation, Richard Morison, a Cambridge friend of William Cecil's became Thomas Cromwell's chief propagandist. He saw in drama a way

to use the tools of the Roman church against it. First he advocated the abolition of Catholic drama and then its replacement by Protestant anti-papal drama in the vernacular.

Howmoche better is it that those plaies shulde be forbidden and deleted and others dyvysed to set forthe and declare lyvely before the peoples eies the abhomynation and wickedness of the bisshop of Rome, monkes, ffreers, nonnes, and suche like, ...⁴¹

The perfect vehicle to allow Cromwell to carry out Morison's plan was another Cambridge reformer, John Bale, who put his talents as a polemicist and playwright to the cause of the anti-papal campaign launched by Cromwell to gather support for the break from Rome in the mid 1530s. The partnership between Bale and Cromwell in this campaign is now a well established and important thread in the history of English drama.⁴²

However, more recently, it has become clear that William Cecil also used this instrument of state propaganda. We have the opinion of the Spanish Ambassador that this was so but we also now have evidence from the records.⁴³ During the time when he was part of the inner circle of government under Edward and again when he became Elizabeth's first minister, the pattern of provincial touring by players patronized either by the monarch or by members of the Privy Council was reinstated. Some years ago I did an analysis of the evidence presented by REED's Patrons and Players website listing all the travelling companies and their patrons so far published in REED volumes. In Cromwell's time the percentage of companies on the road patronized by staunchly Protestant members of the Privy Council was 83%; under Edward 77% and in the first five years of Elizabeth's reign again 83%. Of the 173 performances so far recorded between 1558 and 1563, 99 or more than half are by three companies – 44 were by the queen's company, 35 the company of Lord Robert Dudley (not yet the earl of Leicester) and 20 the company of his brother Ambrose.⁴⁴

Ten years earlier, in 1551, John Dudley, their father, earl of Warwick, Edward's chief minister after the fall of Somerset, issued a proclamation stating clearly that it was the duty of the sovereign to ensure the setting 'furth of Goddes holy worde and the establishment of a pure

and sincere religion, conformable to goddes institucion, and the vsage of the holy catholique church'. It lamented the effect that idle invention in books and plays were having on the 'kinges maiesties louyng and faithful subiectes' and forbad the printing and playing of such things.⁴⁵ Early theatre historians tended not to read beyond the prohibitions, ignoring the crucially important exception that followed that stated that, if permission was granted by the king or six members of the Privy Council and a license obtained, such plays *could* be performed. Local authorities were to ensure that any players seeking to perform within their jurisdictions had the requisite license. Eight years later, on 16 May 1559, Elizabeth issued her 'proclamation against plays' requiring the licensing of plays but also requiring that no plays be played 'wherin either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the common weale shall be handled or treated'.⁴⁶ This has frequently been taken as a prohibition against using drama as propaganda. But again there is a qualifying clause that follows the apparent blanket prohibition 'beyng no meete matters be wrytten or treated vpon, but by menne of auctoritie, learning, and wisdome, nor to be handled before any audience but of graue and discreete persons'. Like the Edwardian proclamation, this one can be seen as directed at unauthorized plays and playing, not at plays sanctioned by the 'menne of auctoritie, learning and wisdome' who constituted the Privy Council and their agents in the local governments in the counties, cities and towns of England. Two years later John Foxe the author of *The Book of Martyrs*, wrote triumphantly, 'Players, Printers and Preachers be set up of God as a triple bulwark against the triple crown of the Pope, to bring him down.'⁴⁷

In 1569, in the tenth year of Elizabeth's reign, a rebellion of northern earls sympathetic to the old religion was suppressed, securing her hold on the throne. From that time onward, her Council moved confidently to appoint Protestant civil and religious leaders in the north and, as we have seen, began the systematic suppression of the old community drama. The tight control of whose players could be 'on the road' was also relaxed. State

sponsored propaganda pieces became less common. By the time the famous Queen's Men were established in 1583, the themes they presented were more of nationalism (not to say jingoism) with plays based on English history central to their repertoire. These became the direct sources of many of Shakespeare's history plays. Much court discourse continued to be carried on through drama and pageantry. Many masques and entertainments presented to the queen on her frequent progresses contain political undertones or seek personal favour. This practice continues in to the seventeenth century with such pieces as the 1613 *Masque of the Fairy Prince* in which Prince Henry, James I oldest son who died all too soon after the masque was performed, is clearly signalling to his father that he is now a grown man and should have his own court. But with the opening of the public theatres the fare offered there becomes less controlled and turned more to the public taste.

When Shakespeare arrived in London in 1592, he brought with him the rich heritage of playmaking in the provinces to be mixed with the traditions from the universities and the court. The traditions he inherited and exploited were more than entertainment; they were part of the social, political and religious discourse of the nation.

The establishment of the first professional theatre in London in 1575 that was in no way tied into the propaganda machine of the church or state has been rightly hailed by scholars of early modern drama as the beginning of the English classical theatre. But it can also be seen as the beginning of the end of a great tradition. Shakespeare stands on the shoulders of the playwrights who went before him using their conventions to create a unique magic of his own. But he also was part of, and helped to shape, the culture of business that became the foundation of the commercial theatre. Shakespeare made money from his plays – and retired to the country on the proceeds. Players before the professional theatres were dependent on their patrons for their stability and for much of their livelihood and so performed what they were asked to perform as the players did in *Hamlet*. Although the

system of royal or noble patronage survives well in to the seventeenth century, the major source of income for players and sharers of the commercial theatre became the box office. To make the theatres pay, audiences had to continue to be attracted. In stead of providing didactic or quasi didactic fare, or even the jingoism so often lamented in the history plays, increasingly Jacobean and Caroline playwrights resorted to sex and violence that not only, as many have argued, reflects the darkness of a society slipping once again in to civil war but also the taste of the paying customers for the equivalent of bread and circuses. The disgust of the Puritan faction at the decadence of the Caroline theatre was in many ways justified. It can be argued that the closing of the play houses in 1642 had its roots in the creation of the entertainment industry in 1575. The traditions of ceremony and of religious, social and political discourse at every level of society that had shaped the dramatic traditions before 1575 could not withstand the later need for commercial gain to keep an industry alive.

¹ Daniel Seltzer, 'The Actor and Staging,' in Kenneth Muir and Samuel Schoenbaum, eds, *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 35.

² The standard scholarly editions of these plays are Donald C. Baker and John L. Murphy and Louis B. Hall Jr., eds., *The Late Medieval Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160*, EETS, ES 283, 1982; Richard Beadle, ed., *The York Plays*, vol 1, EETS SS 23, 2009; Arthur C. Cawley, ed., *Everyman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961); Arthur C. Cawley and Martin Stevens, eds. *The Towneley Plays*, EETS, SS 13 and 14, 1994; Norman Davis, ed., *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, EETS, SS 1, 1970; Mark Eccles, ed., *The Macro Plays*, EETS, ES 262, 1969; Peter Happe, ed., *The Complete Works of John Bale*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985); Pamela King, ed. *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2000); Ian Lancashire, ed., *Two Tudor Interludes: Youth and Hickscorner* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980); Robert M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds., *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, 2 vols., EETS SS. 3 (1974) and 9 (1986); Alan H. Nelson, ed., *The Plays of Henry Medwall* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1980); Paula Neuss, ed., *John Skelton's Magnificence*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980); Stephen Spector, ed., *The N-Town Play*, 2 vols., EETS, SS 11, 1991.

³ John S. Farmer, ed., *Tudor Facsimile Texts*, issued for subscribers 1907-14. Many now available on line.

⁴ E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1903); *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923).

⁵ J.M. Manly, *Specimens of Pre-Shakespearean Drama* (Boston: Ginn, 1897); A.W. Pollard, *English miracle plays, moralities and interludes: specimen of the pre-Elizabethan drama*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895)

⁶ David Bevington, *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).

⁷ David Bevington, 'Drama Editing and Its Relation to Recent Trends in Literary Criticism' in Alexandra F. Johnston, ed., *Editing Early English Drama: Special Problems and New Directions* (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 20-1.

⁸ Joseph Quincy Adams, *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924).

⁹ Bevington, 'Drama Editing', 23.

¹⁰ *The Medieval Stage*, vol 2, Appendix W, 329-406.

¹¹ W.W. Greg, W.W. Greg 'Bibliographical and Textual Problems of the English Miracle Plays' *The Library* 3rd series 5 (1914).

- ¹² Arthur Cawley, *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958) 125.
- ¹³ Chambers, *Elizabethan*, vol.4, Appendix D, 338-9.
- ¹⁴ John R. Elliott, jr., *Playing God: Medieval Mysteries on the Modern Stage* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 55.
- ¹⁵ Elliott, 25-41.
- ¹⁶ This anecdote was told me by Browne himself some time after 1974 when I met him at a conference in Leeds. He died in 1980. See also E. Martin Browne with Henzie Browne, *Two in One* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Chapter 2 'Canterbury: the first *Murder*', 91-112
- ¹⁷ Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955)
- ¹⁸ Frederick M. Salter, *Medieval Drama in Chester* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1955).
- ¹⁹ Peter Meredith, ed., *The Mary Play from the N.Town Manuscript* (London: Longmans, 1987).
- ²⁰ Barbara Palmer, "'Towneley Plays" or "Wakefield Cycle" Revisited'. *Comparative Drama* 22 (1988) 318-48 and 'Recycling "The Wakefield Cycle": The Records', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, XLI (2002) 88-130. At the International Medieval Congress at Leeds in 2010, Peter Meredith accepted the redating but suggested that the manuscript might represent the play performed in Wakefield the 1550s. He did not address the issue of the formal and elaborate nature of the ms that is unlike any other in the canon.
- ²¹ James M. Gibson, ed., *Kent*, 3 vols. Records of Early English Drama (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002). See also James M. Gibson, "'Interludum Passionis Domini': Parish Drama in Medieval New Romney' in Alexandra F. Johnston and Wim Husken, eds., *English Parish Drama* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Rodopi Press, 1996), 137-48.
- ²² Margaret Rogerson, *Playing a Part in History: The York Mysteries 1951-2006* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), Chapter 3.
- ²³ Alexandra F. Johnston, 'Medieval Drama in England—1966', *Queen's Quarterly*, 74 (1967), 78-91.
- ²⁴ The major productions have been: the York Plays (1977 and 1998), the Chester Plays (1983 and 2010), the N-Town Passion Play (1981) N-Town Pageants (1988), The Towneley Plays (1985), *Castle of Perseverance* (1979), *Mary Magdalene* (2003). See also the website <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~plspls/>
- ²⁵ Alan H. Nelson, 'Principles of Processional Staging: the York Cycle,' *Modern Philology* 67 (1970), 303-20.
- ²⁶ This story is told in more detail in Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The Founding of Records of Early English Drama' in Audrey Douglas and Sally-Beth MacLean, eds., *REED in Review* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 21-38.
- ²⁷ Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The York Cycle, 1977,' *UTQ*, XLVIII (1978), 1-9. See also various reviews in *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* XX (1977), 107-22
- ²⁸ William Proctor Williams, *Shakespeare Newsletter* 53 (2003) 41.
- ²⁹ Angelo Raine, *York Civic Records I* Yorkshire Archeological Society 98 (1939), 119.
- ³⁰ Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, eds., *York*, 2 vols. Records of Early English Drama (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 142.
- ³¹ See Henry James and Greg Walker, 'The Politics of *Gorboduc*', *English Historical Review* 110 (1995), 109-21 and Norman Jones and Paul Whitfield White, '*Gorboduc* and Royal Marriage Politics: An Elizabethan Playgoer's Report of the Premiere Performance', *English Literary Renaissance*, 26 (1996), 3-16.
- ³² See among other work on the subject Alexandra F. Johnston 'Making Yourself 'per present': Nicholas Love and the Plays of the Passion' in *In Strange Countries: Essays in Memory of John J. Anderson*, David Matthews ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) 96-107.
- ³³ Alexandra F. Johnston, 'Introduction' to the second edition of *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Drama* Richard Beadle and Alan Fletcher, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-25.
- ³⁴ See Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The City as Patron' in *Theatrical Patronage in Early Modern England*, eds. Paul Whitfield White and Suzanne Westfall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 150-75; 'William Cecil and the Drama of Persuasion' in *Shakespeare and Religious Change*, Kenneth Graham and Philip Collington, eds. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 63-87; 'And how the state will beare with it I knowe not' Festschrift article for David Mills, *Medieval English Theatre* 29 part 2 (2009 for 2007) 3-25.
- ³⁵ David N. Klausner, 'The Modular Structure of *Wisdom*' in David Klausner and Karen Sawyer Marselek, eds. '*Bring furth the pagants*' (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007)
- ³⁶ John Geck, "'On yestern day, in Feverere, the yere passeth fully": On the Dating and Prosopography of *Mankind*', *Early Theatre* 12:2 (2009), 33-56.
- ³⁷ Alan H. Nelson, ed., *The Plays of Henry Medwall* (Woodbridge: D.S.Brewer, 1980).
- ³⁸ *York*, 67.
- ³⁹ *York*, 65-73.
- ⁴⁰ Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 1702.

⁴¹ Sydney Anglo, 'An Early Tudor Programme for Plays and Other Demonstrations against the Pope,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtnay Institute* 20 (1957), 177.

⁴² See Paul Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, patronage and playing in Tudor England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁴³ *The Calendar of State Papers, Spanish*, N.S. I (1558-67) 62. Cited in David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968) 127.

⁴⁴ Johnston, 'William Cecil and the Drama of Persuasion', 81-85.

⁴⁵ W.C.Hazlitt, *The English Drama and Stage under the Tudor and Stuart Princes 1543-1664* (Franklin Reprint), 9-10; 13-14.

⁴⁶ Hazlitt, 19-20.

⁴⁷ Cited in White, *Theatre and Reformation*, 3 from John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, S.R.Cattley, ed., Josiah Pratt, rev., 8 vols (London: Religious Tract Society, 1877) VI 31 and 57.