

A Table of Contents for the York Corpus Christi Play

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Fifteenth-century civic records from York provide detailed information about the contents of the Corpus Christi Play presented by the guilds under the supervision of the council. This information is found in two entries in the *A/Y Memorandum Book* (a civic memorandum) and in the council's register of the texts of the episodes of the play.¹ The *A/Y Memorandum Book* entries were compiled by Roger Burton, who was the Common Clerk from 1415 to 1433; one, the *Ordo Paginarum* (1415), contains guild names and brief descriptions of 51 episodes in the play; the other, a second list of pageants (c. 1420), gives guild names and titles of 56 episodes.² The council's register of the texts belonging to the guilds (1463–1477) contains 48 episodes with space for another 3.³ These sources suggest a total play containing at least 51 episodes.

Although these sources are of great significance, they need not be taken at their face value. It may be that a play of 51 or more episodes was never envisaged by the York council or the guilds for their Corpus Christi celebrations. This is indicated by a council ordinance of 3 April 1476:

Also it is ordeined and stablished . . . from pis day furth perpetually to be obserued and keped . . . yerely in pe tyme of lentyn there shall be called afore the Maire for pe tyme beyne iij of the moste Connyng discrete and able playeres within pis Citie to serche here and examen all pe plaiers and plaies and pagentes throughtoute all pe artificeres belonging to corpus christi Plaie And all such as pay shall fynde sufficient in personne and Connyng to pe honour of pe Citie and Worship of pe saide Craftes for to admitte and able and all oper insufficient personnes either in Connyng voice or personne to discharge ammove and avoid.⁴

The ordinance is a clear statement of the right of the mayor to control the contents of the Corpus Christi Play presented in his city. He had the power to make a selection of the episodes offered by the guilds. He could reject episodes on the

¹For a facsimile of these see R. Beadle and P. Meredith, *The York Play* (Leeds Texts and Monographs, Medieval Drama Facsimiles VII, 1983). For transcriptions see A. F. Johnston and M. Rogerson, *Records of Early English Drama: York* (REED, York) (Toronto, 1979), pp. 16–26 (*A/Y Memorandum Book* entries); and R. Beadle, *The York Plays* (London, 1982) (play text).

²A 57th episode was added to the second list in a later hand.

³The date of the manuscript is suggested by Beadle, *The York Plays*, p. 11. Beadle lists only 47 episodes as he combines the Masons and Goldsmiths episodes, *Herod and The Magi*, as a single unit, episode XVI.

⁴REED, York, p. 109.

grounds of poor acting (by the *plaiers*), the faithfulness of the episode in rehearsal to the registered text (*plaies*), or the state of the wagon (*pageantes*). It is clear that if the guilds were found lacking in any way, they could be excluded from the performance.

The 1476 ordinance indicates that a play of less than 51 episodes was considered proper by the authorities around the time of the compilation of the official register (1463–1477). It is possible that the ordinance was made because the authorities felt that the performance was too long or of uneven quality and that there had to be some clear authority to restrict or regulate it.

That a play of less than 51 episodes was feasible as a dramatic unit is suggested by civic records of the sixteenth century. Entries in the York Chamberlains' accounts of 1535 imply that a play of less than 51 episodes was planned for that year. The Chamberlains' accounts suggest that the council was planning a play of only 32 episodes, although 44 episodes of the 51 suggested by the register were theoretically available.⁵

In 1535 the city council had decided that the Corpus Christi Play was to be replaced by a performance of the Creed Play. As the guilds were not burdened with financing their episodes, they agreed to surrender their pageant funds to the civic treasury to assist with expenses of a law suit. At first they were required to give only half their pageant funds, but this was not enough and the council took in the other half. The city Chamberlains recorded the two instalments.⁶ The following Corpus Christi Play of 32 episodes can be reconstructed from their lists:

	Guild	Episode	Amount⁷
1.	Tanners	The Fall of the Angels (includes Creation of Earth)	20s.
2.	Walkers	Adam and Eve in Eden	6s. 8d.
3.	Coopers	The Fall of Man	2s. 8d.
4.	Armourers	The Expulsion	2s. 8d.
5.	Glovers	Cain and Abel	8s.
6.	Parchmentmakers	Abraham and Isaac	5s. 8d.
7.	Apothecaries	The Annunciation and Visitation	2s. 4d.
8.	Pewterers and Founders	Joseph's Troubles about Mary	8s.
9.	Goldsmiths	The Magi	8s.
10.	Girdlers	The Slaughter of the Innocents	7s.

⁵Not all the registered episodes were available by 1535. *The Creation of Adam and Eve* (Cardmakers) had been combined with *Adam and Eve in Eden*, see REED, *York*, pp. 249–50. The Hosiers (*Moses and Pharaoh*) and Tailors (*The Ascension*) contributed to the Drapers (*The Death of the Virgin*) and apparently no longer had pageants of their own, see REED, *York*, p. 201.

⁶REED, *York*, pp. 257–61.

⁷The guild names are those given in the Chamberlains' lists. The episode titles are those given by Beadle in *The York Plays*. The amounts are additions of the two Chamberlains' lists, except in the case of the Bakers, Painters, and Woollenweavers, whose payments appear in only one list. On the analogy of the other figures, I have assumed that the amount entered for each of these three guilds represents half of their pageant fund and have doubled the amount recorded.

11. Spurriers	Christ and the Doctors	3s. 4d
12. Barbers	The Baptism	10s.
13. Smiths ⁸	The Temptation	6s. 8d.
14. Curriers	The Transfiguration	3s. 4d.
15. Cappers	The Woman Taken in Adultery/ The Raising of Lazarus	8s.
16. Skinners	The Entry into Jerusalem	10s.
17. Smiths and Cutlers	The Conspiracy	14s.
18. Bakers	The Last Supper	10s.
19. Cordwainers	The Agony in the Garden and the Betrayal	20s.
20. Bowyers and Fletchers	Christ before Annas and Caiaphas	13s.
21. Tapiters	Christ before Pilate 1: The Dream of Pilate's Wife	12s.
22. Dyers	Christ before Herod	12s.
23. Millers and Tilemakers	Christ before Pilate 2: The Judgment	16s. 4d
24. Painters	The Crucifixion	7s. 4d.
25. Butchers	The Death of Christ	10s.
26. Saddlers and Glaziers	The Harrowing of Hell	12s. 8d
27. Carpenters	The Resurrection	14s.
28. Sledmen	The Supper at Emmaus ⁹	2s. 8d
29. Potters	Pentecost	6s.
30. Drapers, Tailors, and Hosiers	The Death of the Virgin	20s.
31. Woollenweavers	The Assumption of the Virgin	7s. 4d.
32. Merchants	The Last Judgment	24s.

The Corpus Christi Play of 1535 is a complete dramatic unit, despite the fact that 12 of the 44 registered episodes still theoretically available at the time are missing. Those missing are:

Guild	Episode
Plasterers	The Creation
Shipwrights	The Building of the Ark
Fishers and Mariners	The Flood
Tilehatchers	The Nativity
Chandlers	The Shepherds
Hatmakers, Masons, and Labourers	The Purification
Marshals	The Flight into Egypt
Cooks and Waterleaders	The Remorse of Judas
Shearmen	The Road to Calvary
Winedrawers	Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene
Scriveners	The Incredulity of Thomas
Hostelers	The Coronation of the Virgin ¹⁰

⁸The Smiths and Marshals were a single guild and had two episodes, *REED, York*, pp. 59–60, 123–24. As the Marshals were not listed by the Chamberlains, I have assumed that *The Flight into Egypt*, was not available in 1535.

⁹The Sledmen are connected with this episode in the play manuscript, see Beadle and Meredith, *The York Play*, pp. xxviii–xxix.

¹⁰Space was left in the the register for *The Funeral of the Virgin ('Fergus')* but it appears to have been in disfavour for many years before 1535 and is unlikely to have been presented for some time, *REED, York*, pp. 216, 245. The owners of *Fergus*, the Linenweavers, seem to have avoided presenting their episode by contributing to the Woollenweavers' episode (*The Assumption of the Virgin*).

The episodes which appear in the 1535 play compensate adequately for the registered episodes which are missing:

The Creation sequence is filled by episodes 1–4, with 1 missing.

The Old Testament sequence is filled by episodes 5 and 6, with 2 missing.

The Nativity sequence is filled by episodes 7–10, with 4 missing.

The Life of Christ sequence is filled by episodes 11–15, with no omissions.¹¹

The Passion sequence is filled by plays 16–26, with 2 of the registered episodes missing.

The Resurrection sequence is filled by plays 27–31, with 3 of the registered episodes missing.

And the Last Judgment is present in the 1535 play.

While there was a general thinning of episodes, the emphasis of the play was unchanged in 1535. Not more than half the registered episodes in any sequence were missing, and the Life of Christ and the Passion sequences were still dominant in the structure.

The 1535 play stands up well against V. A. Kolve's analysis of 'formally significant material' for a Corpus Christi Play.¹² The only possible weakness is the lack of the *Noah* episode, which Kolve notes as being of 'first priority'. Kolve shows that the *Noah* episode has figural links with *The Baptism* and *The Last Judgment*.¹³ Although the 1535 play offers no alternative links with *The Baptism*, it does have links with *The Last Judgment* in *The Raising of Lazarus* and the Resurrection sequence. Further, the play contains both *Cain and Abel* and *Abraham and Isaac*, which might be considered sufficient presentation of figural Old Testament episodes.

Richard Beadle comments on the 1535 Chamberlains' lists but seems to doubt the importance of the evidence they provide of the episodes included in the play at that time.¹⁴ His first concern is that the 1535 play has a 'chequered appearance'. The analysis above shows that this was not the case and that the play was consistent with the overall structure of a Corpus Christi Play.

Beadle's second concern is with the variation in the amounts that the guilds offered to the council as an indication of variation in the quality of presentation. This concern can also be shown to be unfounded. The Chamberlains' books were

¹¹Space was left in the register for *The Marriage at Cana* and *Jesus in the House of Simon the Leper*. I have not included unregistered episodes in my calculations.

¹²V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London, 1966), pp. 54–55.

¹³*The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 85, fig. 1.

¹⁴Beadle and Meredith, *The York Plays*, p. 28 and note, pp. 31–32.

running accounts and not always complete and, therefore, were not the final balance sheet for the council's finances. The final accounts were presented on rolls which underwent audit, but, unfortunately, the rolls for 1535 are not extant. It is possible that the Chamberlains only recorded the amounts paid by those guilds which actually presented episodes and had not caught up with the lesser guilds, which did not own episodes but contributed financially to those of others. Many guilds collected additional pageant money from other crafts, but this may not have been included in the pageant money they handed over to the council. In the Bakers' accounts, for example, pageant money collected from guild members was traditionally listed separately from that of other contributors. In 1547, the members of the Bakers' guild gave 15s., but the Sandcarters and Watercarters gave an additional 6s. 7d.¹⁵ The amount of 10s. recorded by the Chamberlains for the Bakers in 1535 may not have included the customary contributions of the Sandcarters and Watercarters.¹⁶ Other guilds in the 1535 account list had financial assistance from outsiders; for example, the Girdlers were assisted by the Whitchandlers and Saucemakers, the Skinners by the Vestmentmakers, the Painters by the Pinners, and the Carpenters by the Cartwrights.¹⁷ The contributions of these outsiders were not itemized by the Chamberlains in 1535. The amounts may not, therefore, represent the total funds available for the presentation of all the episodes. Perhaps the guilds declared their own members' fund, but not the money from outsiders. This could have been the case, especially as the Chamberlains did list the contributions of the Pewterers and Founders and the Millers and Tilemakers separately, although these groups shared the major responsibility for episodes. Further, in the case of the Apothecaries, the Chamberlains only list payments from one man, Richard Mertyn. His 2s. 3d. can not be regarded as the total pageant fund for his guild.

Variations in the amounts collected can be explained by the different requirements of the episodes according to the demands of the subject matter. It is reasonable to assume that the first and the last episodes in the play, *The Fall of the Angels* (which includes the Creation of Earth) and *The Last Judgment*, were lavish spectacles. In 1535, the guilds presenting these episodes had 20s. and 24s. respectively. The only other episodes which had comparable funds in 1535 were *The Agony in the Garden and the Betrayal* (20s.) and *The Assumption of the Virgin* (20s.). In both cases it can be assumed that there may have been a need for

¹⁵REED, *York*, p. 291.

¹⁶REED, *York*, p. 671.

¹⁷REED, *York*, pp. 665, 670, 676, 678.

elaborate staging. The staging of other episodes, such as *Christ and the Doctors*, might not have needed substantial funds.

The 32-episode play reconstructed from the 1535 Chamberlains' lists contributes to an understanding of the Corpus Christi Play at York. Although 12 of the possible 44 registered pageants are missing, the play remains a viable dramatic unit. We can therefore speculate that the 1535 evidence represents the table of contents for the Corpus Christi Play the council would have authorized if the Creed Play had not been performed.

The 1535 evidence supports the possibility that while the *Ordo*, the second list, and the register may represent the total number of episodes which could be drawn on to make up a Corpus Christi Play, none of them need be regarded as representing an unalterable whole. The structure that these sources document can be regarded as one that allowed for fluctuation in the fortunes of the guilds and deliberate omissions on the part of the council. The 1535 case shows that the loss of up to half the episodes in some sequences did not destroy the overall structure of the Corpus Christi Play. It can be concluded, therefore, that there may never have been a performance at York which included 51 or more episodes, but that the council, in the spirit of the ordinance of 1476, authorized only a selected number of episodes for each performance. The table of contents could have varied from one performance to the next.