

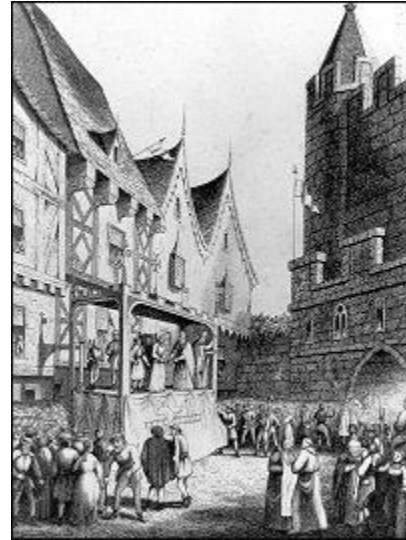
Coventry Mystery Plays

It is a Thursday in June, the feast of Corpus Christi, and between the cobbles and the eaves of ancient Gosford Street the procession of Coventry pageants is gathering.

There are ten of them in all, covering the story of the world from Creation to Doomsday, and each mystery play is a source of fierce pride to the craft guild that has created it.

For weeks, work has been going on in the guild pageant houses to rehearse this year's plays and make the wagons, or 'pageants', ready for performance. And now the moment has come for the guilds to move in procession to staging points throughout the city – among them the Shearmen and Tailors, with their account of the Nativity, the Weavers, telling the story of the child Jesus and the Doctors in the Temple, and the Drapers, presenting their extravagantly mounted and expensive Doomsday play.

The streets of the city are crammed with excited crowds. The feast of Corpus Christi marks the beginning of a week-long annual fair in Coventry and the people of the city are in festive mood. They have been joined by thousands more revellers from near and far, for Coventry's cycle of mystery plays are famous throughout England.



The origins of these mediaeval dramas are themselves shrouded in mystery. The first written reference to them comes in 1392, although it's likely that they were well-established long before that. For another 200 years they were to be a core event in Coventry's annual calendar, a beguiling mix of the sacred and the profane.

Other cities boasted mystery plays in the Middle Ages, notably York and Chester, but none were as famous as Coventry's and none attracted the same level of royal patronage.

The roll call of royal spectators is impressive. Henry V and Henry VI both visited Coventry to see them. Richard III came a couple of months before meeting his fate at the battle of Bosworth Field, and a year later his conquerer Henry VII was in the audience.

Henry VIII, a man with a great love for theatre, saw them in 1511, while Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI and a woman with a great love for Coventry, was a spectator in 1457. On that occasion darkness fell before the Drapers could perform their Doomsday play, the tenth and last in the cycle. Queen Margaret was, it is recorded, not amused.

There were royal performances on separate occasions too. In 1526, Mary Tudor saw a special performance of the Mercers' play, which dealt with the later life of the Virgin Mary. But it was her sister Elizabeth's visit, in August 1566, that was to prove the most memorable.

The Queen came with a huge retinue and lodged at Whitefriars, then the home of the Hales family. Four plays were chosen for her to see and the royal party watched them surrounded by respectful crowds in Earl Street, right in the heart of the city.

Such patronage could not be bought and it is hardly surprising that the historian Sir William Dugdale, writing many decades later, claimed to have interviewed an old man who remembered that "the yearly confluence of people to see that show (the mystery plays) was extraordinary great, and yielded no small advantage to this city".

Sadly, only two of the ten Coventry pageants have come down to us - the plays performed by the Shearmen and Tailors and the Weavers guilds. And we owe their survival to the Coventry antiquarian Thomas Sharp, who transcribed them in the 1820s.

Sharp's 'Dissertation on the Dramatic Mysteries anciently performed at Coventry' was attacked at the time for its almost painful attention to detail. But what little we know of the texts and of how the plays were performed can be laid at his door.

We know that the wagons, or 'pageants', were two-storey constructions of iron and wood, which despite their weight were man-handled through the city streets to each 'station' or performing site.

The Drapers pageant boasted a mechanical hell's mouth on the side and had machinery built into it to move actors up and down between heaven and hell. The Shearmen and Tailors almost certainly had more than one vehicle as their play called for many scene changes.

It is this play, focused on the Nativity, that allows us still to glimpse something of the humour and emotional force that audiences in the Middle Ages would have relished – querulous and ridiculous Joseph and the comic shepherds, a ranting, violent Herod and the raw emotion of the Coventry Carol, still powerful many hundreds of years later.

As for the men – there were no women – who performed these roles and produced the plays themselves, we have only tantalising glimpses.

Some would be members of the guild, but not all. In 1523, Japheth Borseley, a member of a prominent family of Coventry cappers, was allowed to take a role in the Weavers' pageant, almost certainly because of his family connections.

Contrast him with John Careles, a weaver who was released from jail to act in the guild's play. It didn't do poor John much good. Afterwards he was sent in chains to London, where he died in prison and his body was 'cast on a dunghill'.

The producers are equally shadowy. In the 1450s the Smiths' craft guild employed Thomas Colclow, a skinner, to organise their pageant for them, while in the 1530s, Robert Crow, the most prominent impresario of the Coventry mysteries, re-wrote the Weavers and Shearman and Tailors pageants.

By Crow's time the writing was already on the wall for the Coventry pageants. As the city became more Puritan and anti-theatrical in its politics, it became harder to defend the lavish staging of biblical stories. Traditionalists like master upholsterer Thomas Massey fought an increasingly desperate rearguard action, but the last complete cycle of the plays was performed in 1579.

Twelve years later the city council decreed that only a new generation of plays with titles like the Destruction of Jerusalem, the Conquest of the Danes and the History of Edward IV, could be performed.

The revival of the Coventry Mystery Plays by the Belgrade Theatre over the past 25 years has taken them off the streets and fashioned them very much for a modern audience.

Yet in the sound and colour of a summer evening in the city's old cathedral is it not possible to detect the faintest echo of rumbling pageant wheels and an awe-struck crowd?