

WATCHING THE WATCHERS: DRAMA SPECTATORSHIP AND  
COUNTER-SURVEILLANCE IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CHESTER

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ABSTRACT

The late medieval cycle of 24 plays at Chester was begun in earnest during the fifteenth century and transformed in the sixteenth, forming a long and coherent theatrical tradition. Recent scholarship and criticism have documented the civic and religious cultures behind the performances, including the final bitter struggle surrounding its last performance in 1575. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the town developed an awareness of its reflected image in the plays and that the Town Assembly had an increasingly anxious collective ego stake in the performances.

In this paper I explore the material circumstances surrounding this last performance of the Chester plays to suggest that during the course of the sixteenth century the town's civic identity changed in more drastic ways than have been indicated before. As it fell under the shadow of reformed authority, a zealous and suspicious political culture emerged in Chester. Sponsorship and spectatorship of play performances there now began to take on a darker significance. The productions may have started out as expressions of relatively benign community boosterism, but within a generation the audience was subjected to a more malignant and controlling oligarchic force, one bent on policing the lives of its citizens. In earlier years the Chester plays had wound through its streets in processional form, stopping at a dozen sites to be viewed. Now the most important performance occurred at the center of town before the Mayor and his Brethren, who sat in the newly built Pentice, or City Hall. From here the ruling oligarchy watched performances with one suspicious eye on the play's embedded Catholic doctrine and the other on the audience, ever alert for signs of religious waywardness. Not only the playtexts but the audience itself thus became subject to further scrutiny and correction in the courts. Like Jeremy Bentham's nineteenth-century Penitentiary Panopticon, the Pentice provides us with a Foucauldian emblem for the godly discipline and punishment available to early modern thought police.

As Margaret Schlauch pointed out in *English medieval literature and its social foundations* (1967), the late medieval cycle of twenty-four plays at Chester was begun in earnest during the fifteenth century and transformed in the sixteenth, forming a long and coherent theatrical tradition. Other scholarship and criticism have documented the civic and religious cultures behind the performances, not-

ing that over the course of nearly two centuries the plays functioned as public displays of piety and entertainment until their untimely demise under pressure from reformers in 1575. The best current authority on the Chester plays, David Mills, has recently described in detail, in *Recycling the Cycle: The City of Chester and its Whitsun Plays* (1998), the shift of venue from Corpus Christi Day to Whitsuntide in the early 1520s, the reshuffling of guild and pageant assignments, the attempted post-reformation substitution of an alternate Midsummer show, and the final bitter struggle surrounding the attempted late revival of the plays. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the town developed an awareness of its reflected image in the plays and an increasingly anxious collective ego stake in the performances.

In this paper I sketch out and to explore further some of those circumstances surrounding the last performance of the Chester plays, proposing that during the course of the late sixteenth century the town's civic identity changed in more drastic ways than have been appreciated before, and that the fate of play performances there represents a story with darker significance, one about social forces bent on policing the lives of citizens. The process, it turns out, is eerily familiar.

## I

In summer of 1575, as Midsummer Eve approached in the west-midlands town of Chester, near the Welsh border, a large number of its citizenry busied themselves in preparation for a production of the town's cycle plays. Their performance schedule called for them to begin the following Sunday afternoon, June 26, and to end three days later.<sup>1</sup> The plays made for an elaborate event. It took at least three days to perform the twenty-four pageants – that is, the individual plays depicting stories from the Old and New Testaments – since they were mounted on two-tiered pageant-wagons (also called pageants), that moved through the streets, stopping at specified sites where the plays were acted. We know this because a description of the plays has survived, written in the 1609 “Breviary” by David Rogers, using notes made by his father Robert. Both were antiquarians interested in Chester's history, customs, and drama. Rogers tells us that:

The manner of which plays was thus: They weare devided into 24 pagiantes acordeinge to the companyes of the Cittie. And everye companye broughte forthe there pagiant, which was the cariage or place which the played in. And before these playes weare played there was a man which did ride – as, I take it, upon Saint Georges Daye – throughe the cittie and there published the tyme and the matter of the playes in breeife.

<sup>1</sup> For the records of drama pertinent to the 1575 performance, see Clopper (1979: 103-117); for extracts from Roger's Breviary, see further in Clopper (1979: 232-254, 320-326, 351-355, 433-436), and in Lumiansky and Mills (1983: 260-271).

The weare played upon Mondaye, Tuesedaye, and Wensedaye in Whitson Weeke. And thei firste beganne at the Abbaye gates. And when the firste pagiante was played at the Abbaye gates, then it was wheled from thense to Pentice at the Highe Crosse before the maior. And before that was donne, the seconde came; and the firste wente into the Watergate streete and from thense unto the Bridge streete. And so one after another, tell all the pagiantes weare played appoynted for the firste daye. And so likewise for the seconde and the thirde daye.

These pagiantes or carige was a highe place made like a howse with 2 rowmes, beinge open on the tope. The lower rowme, theie apparrelled and dressed themselves; and the higher rowme, theie played. And thei stood vpon vi wheeles. And when the had donne with one cariage in one place, theie wheled the same from one streete to another: firste from the Abbaye gate to the Pentise, then to the Watergate streete, then to the Bridge streete through the lanes, and so to the Estegate streete.

(Lumiansky and Mills 1983: 263)<sup>2</sup>

We will want to return to David Rogers and his father in due course, but for the moment we should take some time to visualize the course the pageants followed through the town.

In an early 17<sup>th</sup> century map of Chester by John Speed (see next page), an inset on his map of the county of Cheshire, we can trace the usual course the pageant wagons followed. They started out in Northgate Street (*C* on map) by the old Abbey of St. Werburgh, where the clergy would see the plays; next, they proceeded south down Northgate Street to the High Cross, turning right at the intersection with Watergate Street (*M* on map) and Eastgate Street (*II* on map) to perform before the mayor and his aldermen at the “Pentice”, the town hall appended to St. Peter's Church (*P* on map); from here they followed Watergate Street west, to perform again before turning left (south) and then left (east) once more, making their way back to Bridge Street (*E* on map), where they may well have performed again; finally crossing Bridge Street, and continuing on “through the lanes” to Eastgate Street (*II* again on map) for their last show.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence from various records gives us some telling details about the Chester plays. The pageant wagons belonged to the guilds, and their two levels were highly decorated. The six-wheeled wagons (this number has caused some worry, see Marshall 1985: 24-26) probably were designed in such a way that the middle wheels on each side were slightly larger than those at each end, allowing for easy swiveling around the tight street corners of the late medieval town. We know that the costumes of the players were elaborate, that masks and gilded

<sup>2</sup> For the corresponding transcript in Clopper (1979), see 238-239.

<sup>3</sup> John Marshall (1985: 36-43) traces out a route similar to this.



Figure 1: John Speed's 1612 Map of Chester, detail of "The Countye Palatine of Chester, with that most ancient citie described", originally appearing in John Speed's *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain* (1612), reprinted in *Counties of Britain*, 50-51.

faces were common (according to Twycross 1985: 121).<sup>4</sup> Music clearly accompanied many performances, provided not only by a variety of musicians but by singers from the Abbey (Meredith 1985: 570).<sup>5</sup> We know that the actors in the various plays were not necessarily from the sponsoring guilds, partly because a full performance of these Chester plays requires a total of 357 named characters, in speaking and non-speaking parts, not including the extras (Twycross 1985: 100, 120).

So the production of the cycle plays was a big event in Chester, made perhaps a little extra special because they were not performed every year. The theatrical tradition extended back to some kind of plays or pageantry dating from the early fifteenth century – perhaps even earlier – but it was never annual. Like so many other town and parish plays in England, they originally had been performed on Corpus Christi Day. That changed in Chester 1521 when they were shifted over to Whitsuntide and given the shape and order later described in David Rogers' "Breviary". The final responsibility for overseeing them belonged to the mayor and the Town Assembly, a group consisting of nearly fifty Aldermen who decided if and when they might take place. Since Elizabeth's accession to the throne in 1558, they had been performed four times, in 1561, 1567, 1568, and 1572 (Mills 1998: 145-152), and the Late Banns of the play – announced by a crier dressed in armor like St. George – indicate that the plays had been revised for doctrinal correctness (Mills 1985: 5). No one seems to have known, in 1575, that this performance would be their last, although some ominous signs had recently appeared. A notation on the Mayor's 1572 list, for example, observed that: "The whole Playes were playde, thoughe manye of the citie were sore against the settinge forthe therof" (Mayor's List 10, in Clopper 1979: 97).<sup>6</sup> In hindsight it is clear that this note testified to the presence of serious opposition from some part of the Town Assembly to the graphic depictions of sacred figures.

Just a few years ago the letterbook of a radical reformed preacher in Chester, the eponymously named Christopher Goodman, came to light in the Denbigh Record Office in Ruthin, and it provides further evidence of the opposition in 1572 (Mills 1998: 146-147). Clearly, Goodman was watching the proceedings carefully. A convinced Protestant with extreme views, he had been one of the Marian exiles who fled to Geneva in 1554, where he became a firm friend and supporter of John Knox. He authored a number of pamphlets, the best known entitled *The Book of Common Order, on Obedience to Those in Authority, and How*

<sup>4</sup> See also the articles by Twycross and Carpenter (1981) and (1982)

<sup>5</sup> Rastall (1985: 77), notes that there are over 30 stage directions demanding music in the Chester Plays.

<sup>6</sup> See also Mayor's Lists 1, 5, and 8 in Clopper (1979: 96-97), which also register civic resistance.

*Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed of their Subjects* (1558). Goodman moved back to Chester in 1570, when he was presented with a living in Aldford and made archdeacon of Richmond. In 1571 he was deprived of his living, brought before the ecclesiastical commissioners for his extreme views, and forbidden to preach, although his letterbook clearly refers to him preaching against the plays in Chester after that date.

In May of 1572 Goodman had written to the president of the Council of the North, the earl of Huntingdon, to complain about the proposed performance of the plays that year, which he asserts “were devised by a monk about 200 years past in the depth of ignorance’, and had been established in Chester by the authority of the pope to ensure the continuity of Catholicism” (Mills 1998: 146). Goodman also complains that “our Mayor of this city joyning himself with such persons as he thought of corrupt affection in religion doth with great practise endeavor to cause them to be played here this next Whitsontide”; and this despite “a note sent by our Preachers to the Mayor” (Mills 1998: 146-147). At the same time, in correspondence with Edmund Grindal, the Archbishop of York who had already suppressed the Corpus Christi Play there, Goodman shrewdly turns the local issue into a case that seemed to demonstrate civic defiance of national authority. Grindal quickly sent a letter to the Mayor, who later would claim to have received it too late. In any case the plays had gone forward that year despite the complaints.

Now, in 1575, Mayor John Savage, an advocate for the plays, had ratified their performance again, “with such correccion and amendement as shalbe thought Convenient by the said Maior” (Clopper 1979: 104). This year, however, they were to be uncoupled from Whitsunday entirely and joined with another civic celebration, the annual Midsummer Show and Fair. The Midsummer Show involved a spectacular parade and festive displays, morris dancers, giants, devils, large animals, stiltwalkers and other crowd pleasers; the Midsummer Fair, one of two such commercial highlights of the year for Chester, followed the show and lasted for several days (Meredith 1985: 52). Even in this secularized venue, resistance to the cycle play’s performance appeared: Andrew Taylor, a member of the Dyers Company, refused to pay his share of the Company’s production of their play, *Antichrist*, and was jailed (Mills 1998: 150). And one more item might have served as a warning sign: beyond the unusual pairing of religious plays with the Midsummer celebrations, it was specified that the cycle was to be played in only one place in the city that year: before the Pentice (Mills 1985: 5). It is perhaps time that we too turned in that direction.

## II

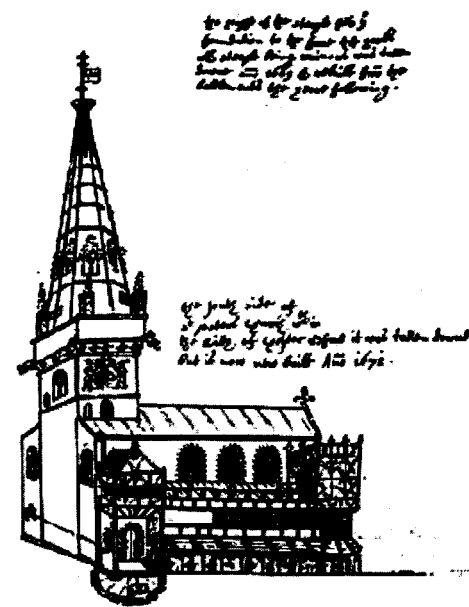


Figure 2: Drawing of the Pentice on the south side of St. Peter’s Church from BL: Harley 2073, f. 88, reprinted in Clopper (1979: lvii).

The Pentice, which takes its name from *appentis*, that which appends a building, was an annex appended to the south side of St. Peter’s Church. Originally built in 1498, it acted as the center of Chester’s civic, judicial, and ceremonial activity, and as a central architectural feature of the city until its demolition in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1573-74, the year before the last performance of the cycle, the Pentice underwent major reconstruction; it was enlarged and an Inner Pentice built. A 17<sup>th</sup> century writer, William Smith, describes the completed project thus:

[The Mayor] remaineth most part of the day; at a place called, the Pendice; which is a brave place builded for the purpose, at the high Cross, under St. Peter’s Church, and in the midst of the City, in such a sort, that a man may stand therein, and see into the Markets, or Four principal streets of the City. There sit also (in a Room adjoining) his Clerks for his the said Mayor’s Courts, where all Actions are entred and recognizances made, and such like.

(Mills 1998: 30)

It would be hard to find a more apt description of the siting – and oversight – of power in a city than this. And could we wish for a better description of the position of secular government in Tudor times than being appended onto the outside of the Church of St. Peter's? It is perhaps no coincidence that in 1573, at a time when churches and abbeys throughout the country were falling into disrepair and ruin, the town of Chester should invest in reconstructing and enlarging its main organ of civic authority. Here, form indeed follows function, and, over time, reconstruction invites deconstruction. Surely, it was not only a physical structure but its own structure of power that Chester was busy shoring up and refurbishing. And we might take particular note of something else: from the Pentice the Mayor and his Aldermen could survey the affairs of the entire town at once from their central position; and such surveillance, according to Smith, allowed them to conduct their work of making and enforcing laws, of discipline and control. We will want to keep some of Smith's observations in mind as we consider the last performance in the city of its late medieval plays.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, then, the first plays went forward, put on before an audience that was clearly in some part zealous and suspicious. The pageant wagons must have passed by the site of their old first stop, St. Werburgh's Abbey, now a Cathedral, and trundled down Northgate street to the High Cross, wheeling around in front of the newly built Pentice to perform the plays before the Mayor and his Aldermen, who could look down on them from their refurbished rooms. Since there were no other places where the plays were performed, the audience must also have included an unusual number of townspeople, arrayed before the city officials and in front of the pageant wagons. A schematic of the arrangement, seen from above, with a dozen pageants lined up around the area in front of the Pentice might look something like this old diagram:

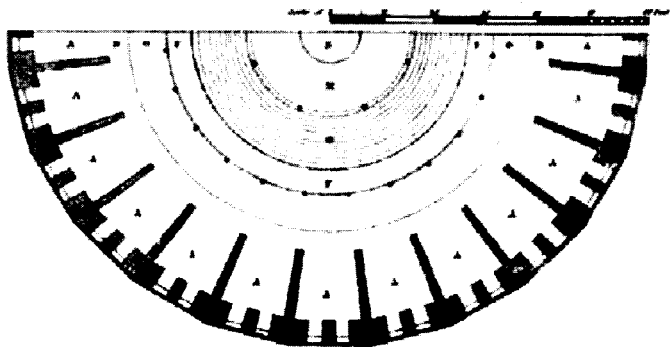


Figure 3: A possible staging schemata for the 1575 Chester plays, from an old diagram, from *The Works of Jeremy Bentham* (1843), IV, 172-173 (detail); reprinted in Foucault (1977 [1995]: 169-170, fig. 3.).

The scheme is, bizarrely, an almost exact reverse rendering of the scheme for an amphitheatre, with the pageant wagons at the outer edges (at *A*) rather than an audience on sloped seats, and the central point (at *N*) representing the officials in the Pentice rather than the stage. In the middle distance, between the Pentice area and the pageant wagons, the audience of ordinary townsfolk might be found (at *F* and *G*). An alternative would be to have the pageant wagons positioned in between the two audiences – the Mayor and his Brethren and the townsfolk – but this arrangement would almost certainly have made the job of acting more difficult for the players, who then would have to perform in two directions at once.

Let us assume, despite the strained circumstances, that the players in Chester that day, and the next three, acted much the same way they always had in recent years, performing broadly and with some realism. Even if this were so, however, the two separate audiences would not have been acting normally. For the Mayor and his Assembly, the letters of complaint from the Archbishop of York and from the incensed preachers were hanging over their heads, as well as the specter of a citizen jailed for refusing to give his support out of religious convictions. And of course right in front of them were the townsfolk assembled by the Pentice, some eager, some hostile, but in larger numbers than ever before at that site. For these townsfolk, the disruption in venue would not have been an innocent fact, and some kind of apprehension surely hung in the air. What, we might reasonably ask, would they all be watching?

The Mayor and his Assembly, from behind the façade of the Pentice, must have watched the plays much as they always did, but especially alert for examples of religious expression that in an earlier age might have proved the town's piety but today could be seen to betray a shameful Popishness. Thus they had to watch the spectators as well as the spectacle, keen to note their responses to the plays, and to being watched as well. Some of the Assembly, those with strong reformed sensibilities, would have been watching more critically than others, and for them there was no right response to the plays: whether it might be interest or anger reflected in the face of a spectator, it would simply confirm their dark view of the entertainment.

At stake in the common weal of the town was the question of the cycle's civic benefits: it had always been agreed that the plays offered more than spectacle, but the understanding in the past had been that they led towards instruction and devotion. The question now was whether the corrected plays might help correct moral and doctrinal waywardness in the town's citizenry. It was a new burden for the plays to bear, this one of correction and moral improvement, one for which they had never been devised, but which had been thrust upon them by historical circumstance.

As it turns out, society has other models for such matters of correction and reform; here is one you may find familiar, very similar to what we have been looking at:

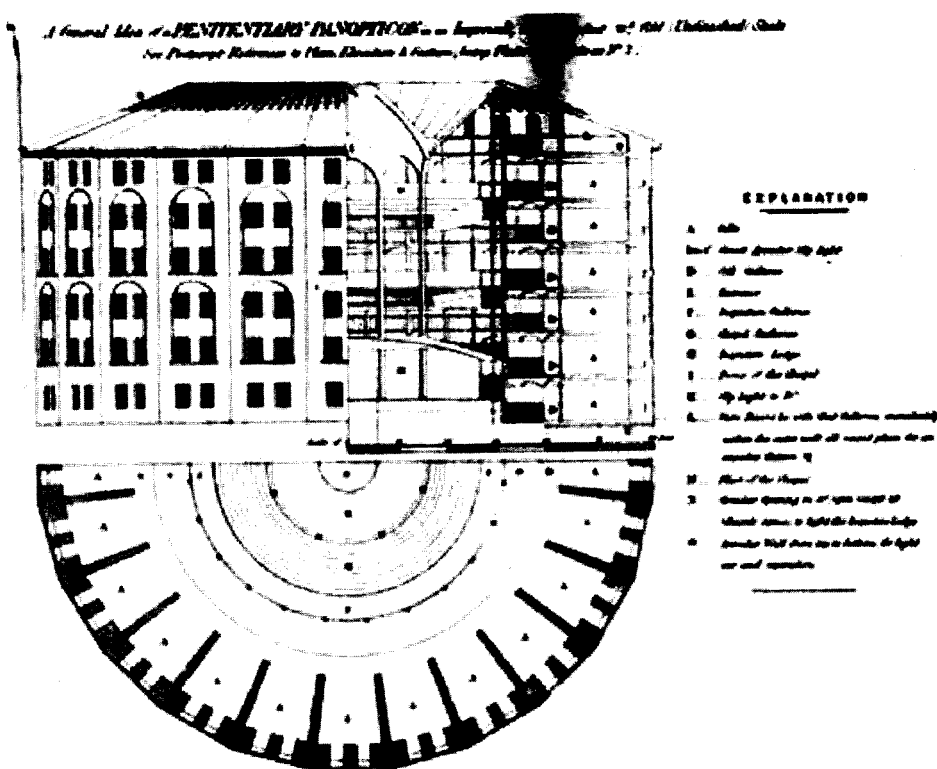


Figure 4: Panopticon. Jeremy Bentham's architectural plan for a Penitentiary Panopticon, an ideal prison, from *The Works of Jeremy Bentham* (1843), IV: 172-173 (full rendering); reprinted in Foucault (1977 [1995]: 169-170, fig. 3.).

The odd thing about Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon is, as we noticed in a different context, how it reverses the field of the theatre. It also functions as the ideal metaphor for social control. Foucault famously observed that:

The theme of the Panopticon – at once surveillance and observation, security and knowledge, individualization and totalization, isolation and transparency – found in the prison its privileged locus of realization. Although the panoptic procedures, as concrete forms of the exercise of power, have become extremely widespread, at least in their less concentrated forms, it was really only in the penitentiary institutions that Bentham's utopia could be fully ex-

pressed in a material form. In the 1830s, the Panopticon became the architectural programme of most prison projects. It was the most direct way of expressing “the intelligence of discipline in stone” (Lucas, I, 69); of making architecture transparent to the administration of power; of making it possible to substitute for force or other violent constraints the gentle efficiency of total surveillance...”

(Foucault 1977 [1995]: 249)

The legal task was

to constitute a prison-machine with a cell of visibility in which the inmate will find himself caught as ‘in the glass house of the Greek philosopher’ (Harou-Romain, 8) and a central point from which a permanent gaze may control prisoners and staff.

(Foucault 1977 [1995]: 249-50)

And finally, tellingly, substituted in place of the offender is the delinquent,

...to be distinguished from the offender by the fact that it is not so much his act as his life that is relevant in characterizing him. The penitentiary operation, if it is to be a genuine re-education, must become the sum total existence of the delinquent, making of the prison a sort of artificial and coercive theatre in which his life will be examined from top to bottom. The legal punishment bears upon an act; the punitive technique on a life; it falls to this punitive technique, therefore, to reconstitute all the sordid detail of a life in the form of knowledge, to fill in the gaps of that knowledge and to act upon it by practice of compulsion. It is a biographical knowledge and a technique for correcting individual lives.

(Foucault 1977 [1995]: 251-2)

### III

Perhaps Foucault's news is old, older than postmodernism. “Denmark's a prison”, says Hamlet. In fact, he notices, the world is one too, “a goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons”. Still, for Chester in 1575, the coincidence of the newly rebuilt Pentice as an explicit locus of surveillance surely resonates as a kind of 16<sup>th</sup> century Panopticon, again not only in form but also in function. The machinery was in place. The performance of the Chester cycle that year, in fact, operated as a charged model of what we might call “the theatre of the observed” (!), one that recognized, in a new, anxious way, theatrical acts as socially significant signs, coded to reveal the presence of delinquents and the need for godly discipline. Thus not only the playtexts but the audience itself became subject to further scrutiny and correction by early modern thought police.

Of course it worked. The conclusion of the story of the Chester plays unfolds like a familiar script. To keep with the Hamlet theme, the rest of Chester's sixteenth-century theatrical history is silence. Before the end, however, as with

Hamlet's drawn-out death, there remains a little more to say. Reports were filed: "The Whitson playes were plaid at Midsomer, and then but some of them, leaueinge others vnplaid which were thought might not be Iustified for the superstition that was in them" (Mills 1998: 149). No amount of tinkering could save the plays' doctrinal content, as their performance had confirmed to the reformers in the audience, and by autumn Mayor John Savage was summoned to appear in London before the Privy Council – whose strict views were beyond question – to answer the charge that he had acted alone in ordering the performance. They were perhaps tipped off by Goodman or, more likely, Archbishop Grindal, writing from York. Locally a similar charge was leveled against John Hankey, who had been mayor during the 1572 performances, and "diuers others of ye Citizens and players were troubled for ye same matter" (Mills 1998: 151). After his appearance before the Privy Council, Savage wrote the Town Assembly from London, begging them for a certificate to affirm that they had in fact authorized his order for the play performance, that he had not been acting alone. The Assembly complied, but the very real threat of punishment for any continuation of the plays was clear. Understandably, no future mayor was willing to take the risk (Mills 1985: 14).

The reformers, in fact, had successfully appropriated the machinery of communal theatre, turning its purposes from a participatory celebration of doctrinal truths to an instrument of interrogation and discipline. However closely or distantly the revised text conformed to its old self, the performative valence of the cycle had been transformed utterly; it now functioned primarily as one more litmus test (litmus *text?*) for reformed doctrinal correctness. But the corrective role thrust upon the cycle killed it, in full view of the crowds, in front of the Mayor and the Assembly, and before the market High Cross, which itself would later be torn down and shattered by the iconoclasts.<sup>7</sup> The Pentice, newly endowed with such extraordinary powers of scopic surveillance, was now occupied by a new Mayor, Henry Hardware, a serious reformer and no advocate of the plays. Christopher Goodman's radical question, apparent in the title of his pamphlet *How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed of their Subjects* had at last been given an answer.

It may be time to return now to David Rogers, whose description of the Chester plays provided us with an outline of their course through the city. It may come as a surprise to read Rogers' last comments on the now disappeared plays and those who suppressed them:

<sup>7</sup> The six-sided, gilded cross and orb was torn down by Parliamentary troops under Sir William Brereton in 1647, see Mills (1998: 30).

[T]here hath binne taken away some thinges and reformed that were not decente: wherein the wisdom and godly care of those Magistrates that did remoue away thinges either sinfull or offensiu. is to be commended. and by all Religeose magistrates there steepes to be troden in. in as muche as the Intende all their actions to godes glorie and the rule or liue of perfection.

(Clopper 1979: 252-253)

Speaking of the Midsummers Show, which predictably was also "reformed" by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Rogers maintains the same tone to congratulate Henry Hardware, the former mayor, "whose governement was godlye, wherein he sought the redresse of manye abuses" and "caused somethinges to be reformed and taken away. that the watchmen of oure soules or Deuines spake against as thinges not fitt to be vsed" (Clopper 1979: 253). Rogers lists in the margin "[a]s the Diuell Ridinge in fethers before the butchars. A man in womans apparell with a diuel waytinge on his horse called cappes & canes", and adds "[f]or the which he deserued Iuste commendation howsoeuar the vulgar [or baser sorte] of people did oppose themselues againste the reformation of sinnes not knoweing that Antiante sinnes oughte to haue new Reformation" (Clopper 1979: 253).

Writing in 1609, Rogers was also in fact a convinced reformer, just as his father, Archdeacon Robert Rogers before him, had been in 1575, when the plays were last performed. Indeed, there is some indication that Robert Rogers had been one of the preachers to sign the letter to Mayor John Savage, complaining about the plays being allowed (Mills 1998: 147). Robert died in 1595, and David, in the "Breviary" – note the pretentious inclination of the title – had gathered together and published the notes of his father, so it is difficult to know with certainty which comments in the collection are David's, which his father's. Not that it makes a difference – which of course is the point. The uncertainty of ascription here offers a spectacular example of how the views of the one generation have been internalized, later to be parroted by the next. Beyond that, Rogers shows how the Foucauldian nightmare of social discipline can come true, vested in the individual but coerced by perpetual, paternal surveillance, that inescapable, unforgettable gaze of authority that sees and judges every move: the texts of the fathers visited upon their sons.

#### IV

And yet how easily does the troubled rhetoric of one generation turn into cant. It has been the argument of this paper that the end of communal festive theatre in Chester came about in large part as a result of religious discipline wielded by principled reformers, zealous ideologues whose immediate goals of godly discipline were clear but for whom long term political and social agendas may have been kept secret even from themselves; moreover, I have argued that

this process demonstrates all too graphically a kind of Foucauldian social surveillance, here brought into play when cultural patterns in Chester were undergoing a violent shift brought about by reformers. The demise of the Chester cycle offers a clear signal that the reformers had won the battle, that the horizons of entertainment in this town at least were changed for the foreseeable future, cleansed of the corrupting taint of display.

When we look forward we find the pattern repeated. Within a generation of the end of the plays, for example, the reformers would win the battle for the jurisdiction and purview of ecclesiastical courts, which came under their control by the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Known today among historians as “bawdy courts”, – a name derived from their prying into and disciplining of sexual mores among ordinary parishioners – they acted like uneasy hybrids between scourges of vice and peeping Toms. The reformers would win the battle of the *Discovery of Witchcraft* (the title of Reginald Scot’s contemporary booklet on the subject), too, ferreting out suspected witches and wise men in local communities and subjecting them to rather crueler means of correction than simple threats, moral outings, or public humiliation might provide. This social surveillance and discipline apparent in the hunt for witches reached its peak just before the mid-seventeenth century mark in England, and its American form flourished in places like Salem, giving Arthur Miller a source for *The Crucible*. Miller, as we know, updated the political implications of the Salem events to implicate the activities of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s HUAC (the House UnAmerican Activities Committee) hearings. We all know too, at this conference in honor of Margaret Schlauch, something of the consequences of that witchhunt, from which she fled.

The reformers – now identified as Puritans – won these battles, and some others as well, and the jackbooted Roundhead troops led by Cromwell even won the war – the English Civil War – in 1642. The new, morally purified government captured the King, eventually executed him and forced the country to its knees for eighteen years until the Restoration in 1660. They also, we might note, closed the theatres.

Although we have been able to detail only a corner of the story in Chester, the Puritan movement’s rise to power is in its own way a kind of success story, like the rise of the Snopes in Faulkner’s trilogy *The Hamlet, The Town, and The Mansion*. Whatever moral we may want to impute to the putting down of festive theatre in Chester and in England by the ideologically driven reformers, or of their other victories that provided a righteous – and self-righteous – social order, we might note, as Arthur Miller did, that the power to discipline and punish itself is not readily deterred, curtailed, or derailed, however it may be decried. It seems, rather, that the process is passed forward, reappropriated from one generation to the next, supplanted, transplanted, new stems grafted onto old roots. And so today, as we look into that dark and backward abyss of time to conjure

up the watchers in Chester and watch them watching the watchers, we cannot ourselves be sure exactly where the path has led, except to the present. We cannot ourselves be sure just who else may be lurking in the wings, principled figures with another cultural agenda, watching us and preparing, ostensibly for our own benefit, a discipline.

What we can do recognize the voices, the empty rhetoric, the cant, and refuse to serve. We can attend to the social and literary texts that we allow to enfold us, the stories that tell us who we are and who we might become. The texts that we inhabit can guide us. We can, in fact, be both the watchers and the watched, the jailers and the jailed, the audience and the player. At the end of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault sounds a call for a battle against the “carceral” mechanisms of society, and I would add simply that the way in is the way out. If the fate of the plays in Chester shows us anything, it is the triumph of a rhetoric of suspicion; our brief is to follow a different road, to resist the old story that the flow of history itself is inevitable, punishing, normalizing. Beyond the story of those plays is our story, which can turn their story to good use. We can, for example, celebrate resisters of carceral social mechanisms, like Margaret Schlauch. The world may or may not be a prison, as Hamlet in his melancholy insists; we also learn from him, from that most observed of all observers, that “nothing is, but thinking makes it so”.

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