WHO ARE OUR CUSTOMERS?
The Audience for Chester's Plays[1]

David Mills

Preamble

Mounting his objections to the dramatic representation of sacred subjects, the author of the late fourteenth–century *Tretise of Miraclis Pleying* turns eventually to the commercialisation of religious occasions:

> this miraclis pleying is verre wittnesse of mennus averice and coveytise byfore — that is, maumetrie, as seith the apostele — for that they shulden spenden upon the nedis of ther negheboris, they spenden upon the pleyis; and to peyen ther rente and ther dette they wolen grucche, and to spenden two so myche upon ther pley they wolen nothinge grucchen. Also to gideren men togidere to bien the derre ther vetailis, and to stiren men to glotonye and to pride and boost they pleyn ther miraclis, and also to hen wherof to spenden on thes miraclis and to holde felawschipe of glotenye and lecherie in sich dayes of miraclis pleying, they bisien hem biforn to more gredily begilen ther neghbors in byinge and in selling. And so this pleyinge of miraclis now on dayes is werre witnesse of hideous coveytise — that is, maumetrie.[2]

No-one has ever seriously challenged the view that medieval religious plays were occasions for profit. But this aspect has perhaps been lost to view as other functions of this varied and multi-purpose genre has drawn critical attention. First it was the invasion of the realm of the religious by the secular. More recently, attention has shifted to the social and political significances attaching to the performances.[3] Such occasions contained and diffused urban tensions; expressed an ideal urban solidarity; served as a focus of popular dissent against centralist authority. Yet, valid though each view has been, the simple commercialism of the occasion remains a constant. Citizens had to bear the production costs and, if those costs were to be recouped, had to attract crowds in order to boost trade–income. For them, the customer came first.

In this paper I want to consider the importance attached to the commercial aspect by the sponsors of Chester's Whitsun Plays; their consequent concern for the response of their audiences; and the possible

part played by these factors in the demise of the Plays and the city's Midsummer Show.

1. Chester's Commercial Priorities

In the absence of detailed monthly accounts from traders in the city it is impossible to quantify their returns on what must be seen as an investment in the Plays, but the prospect of profits was a major inducement to the freemen of Chester to contribute to these performances. Naturally, this commercialism was not foregrounded in the publicity; the plays were justified as edifying spectacles which served to reflect the dignity and decorum of the community, and any commercialism was subsumed within that dignity. But we can perhaps detect an underlying monetary concern in the opening of the Proclamation to the Plays written by Chester's Town Clerk, William Newhall, in c.1531–2:

> fforas[...] as of old tyme not only for the Augmentacion & incres [...] faith of o [...] auyour iesu Crist & to exort the myndes of the common people [...] doctriyne th[...]f but also for the commenwelth & prosperitie of this Citie ...[4]

Prosperitie, 'flourishing or thriving condition, good fortune, wealth',[5] highlights the commercial returns as a major justification for the performance. Significantly, though perhaps more speculatively, the 'not only ... but also' construction seems to reinforce that aspect against the religious function, as if there might be those who doubted the tangible benefits.

Some forty years later, in 1575, when Christopher Goodman, a well-known and influential Chester Puritan minister, drafted an objection to the plays in attempt to dissuade the Mayor, Sir John Savage, from his intended production at Midsummer in that year, his objections were not only theological and legal. He paints a picture of a resistant populace, coerced to contribute to the performance:

> wherby the hearter of many godly & honest per [...] are greatly wounded, the peace of this citie [moche] dangerously assalted, meny for feare of your displeasure constrayned to gyve there consent, others thr[...] [ned] make eny resistance thretned, thoghe they aledge never so good caus[.] [6]

and worries about the expenditure on the plays, especially in view of what he sees as the need for investment in the city and its citizens. Money is

being diverted from valid social reform to idle pastime, at a time when poverty and unemployment are evident:

> Studie I beseche you how to kepe them [*i.e. the citizens*] well occupide, rather than by vayne plays to make the[m] ydle ... Yf we were freed from all thes plagues, and all necessarie workes abowt this Citie [to be] done. yf wickednes & sin were suppressed, & disolute persons broght to good order. Yf the Citie were so hable to cast away so moche monie as by occasion of thes plays wilbe vainely wasted, or elles coulde not bestow it better: than myght you seme to haue som pretence & leasure to play.[7]

Goodman's complaint is a commonplace of Puritan opposition, but he is able to give it particular credence for Chester at this time by reference to the severe loss of revenue to the city in a recent shipping disaster.

> I heare alasse, (to my greate greffe) of the late losse of one chefest ship named the bayre with all hir Ladeinge, the slaghter of diuers marchandes & marineres our brethren in hire, to the vnspeakable sowrow of there wyves children & other frendes, with the losses & hindrance of many an honest man & occupire in this Citie.

We know something of this disaster. The ship was the *Bear Warwick* of Chester and it was ambushed on its return trip from Spain by pirates from 'Bretony'. A statement of the considerable losses indicates that twenty–four prominent Cestrians and a John Fletcher of 'Calye' lost sums varying between £19 and £341, and that the total loss to the citizens, including £1217 16s 8d as the value of the vessel, was £4765 4s 2d.[8] Goodman was presenting a plausible economic argument against the plays.

And when, later in the same year, the Privy Council summoned Mayor Savage for his part in the production, their charge was not sedition but the extravagant use of the city's resources, picking up the point that Goodman had made. Savage was said to have put the plays on

> for the satisfying of his owne singular will luste and pleasure to the great coste and Charges los[.] and harme of the Citizenns and inhabitauntes of the Saide Citie And to their no lit[...] impouerishmente And not by orderly assente of his then brethern the aldermen [...] comen counsell of the said Citie as he shoulde and oughte to haue donne nor to [...] for the wealth benefite and comoditie of the same Citie acordinge to his dutie.[9]

The occasion was seen as a needless expenditure rather than a financial investment; a loss–making enterprise. In reply, the Council, under Mayor Henry Hardware, affirmed that the decision had been properly taken and had been profitable to the community:

> for dyuers good and great consideracions redoundinge to the Comen wealthe benefite and profitte of the said Cittie.[10]

Though the Cycle would never again be played in Chester, the balance between the cost and return of these public events remained important to the last.

2. Customer Care

The plays were, of course, funded by a compulsory levy by the companies on their members, as the note prefacing the undated Early Banns indicates:

> These be the craftys of the Citie the whiche craftys bere the charge of the pagyns in pley of corpus christi.[11]

Writing in the 1609 version of his *Breviary of Chester History*, David Rogers, son of the antiquarian Archdeacon Robert Rogers of Chester, says nothing about how the plays were financed.[12] By the next version, dated by Clopper c.1618–9, he presents the plays as a sort of generous benefaction by the citizens to the public:

> The actores or players. weare the Companies or trades men of the Citti of Chester, who at theire owne Costes and Charges sett forth and alsoe played the same playes yerelye ...[13]

and this impression is strengthened in the *Breviary*–version dated by Clopper c.1622–3:

> The actors and players, weare the occupations & Companies of this Cittie, the Charges and costes thereof which weare greate was theires also ...[14]

It seems that the expense of the production was something that lived in the memory of Chester's guildsmen.

But in the latest *Breviary*, of c.1637–8, David changes the emphasis significantly:

> all being at the Cittizens charge, yet profitable for them, for [both] all bothe farr and neere came to see them ...[15]

There is an outlay, but there is now also a return. The Plays can be seen as a tourist attraction, bringing trade into the city.

In 1609 David does not refer to the audience. But in 1618–9 the audience edges into his account.[16] First he says that the Plays were played in every street — i.e. the four main Roman streets of the city — 'that all people that would mighte behoulde the same', suggesting that processional performance was adopted to enable everyone to have space to see. Then he says, in an enigmatic phrase, that the carriages were 'all open to the behoulders', perhaps indicating concern for sight–lines. Finally, he says that as one play ended at a station another took its place 'to satisfy the beholders in euerye street at one time', implying that the crowds might have become restless or bored. We do not know if David had evidence for this or was just inferring the concern, but the entry suggests that, at least in retrospect, the convenience and response of the audience were regarded as a factor in adopting processional staging.

In the *Breviary* of 1622–3 we find two references to the audience. The first is very similar to that in its predecessor, that the carriages are 'all open on the tope that all behoulders mighte heare & see them'.[17] The second is more enigmatic:

> to se which playes was greate resorte, and also scafoldes and stages made in the streets in those places where they determined to playe theire pagiantes.[18]

David here gives us a sense of the popularity of the occasion (*greate resorte*). The allusion to the *scafoldes and stages* looks like something of an afterthought in the text, but is apparently prompted by the reference to the crowds. Either these structures were for the actors, additional stages that lifted them above the crowds for better visibility or more ambitious stage-effects; or they were for the spectators, to provide better vantage or to hold them back. It is not clear who 'they' were who decided the places where the plays should be played, but it sounds as if the exact location of the stations was a matter of local decision.

Street–level was not the only location available for spectators. Chester is unique in having two levels to its four main streets — the ground-level and upper walkways, known as 'Rows', above the shops.[19] These walkways provide additional vantage–points which we know were crowded for occasions such as the Christmas Watch,[20] although we have no evidence of their occupation during the plays. Additionally, rooms overlooking the playing–places may have served as the equivalent of modern 'hospitality

suites' in which landlords could entertain their friends; the well–known case of the tenant Anne Webster, who successfully contested expulsion by her landlord from her rooms in Bridge Street at the play–time in 1568, seems to suggest a wish to repossess a place for that purpose.[21] Cestrians also had an opportunity to see at least some plays in rehearsal — the equivalent, I suppose, of our preview performances today — since in 1570 a Margaret Rodon, a prisoner at the Northgate Gaol, was seen without her keeper at a couple of rehearsals.[22] Such attendance would also help the actors to relate to their audience and to assess their own effectiveness.

While we have no precise evidence of numbers, there are a couple of court cases which suggest the appeal of play productions. In 1572 Blanche Webb, from Backford, a village six miles from Chester, was in Chester with her sister to see the civic plays.[23] Even more impressive is the case of Howell Willin, who lived in a village called Broughton, seven miles from Ludlow, and was travelling to Holywell in North Wales to seek a cure for a sore foot (presumably at St. Winifred's Well — an interesting example of the persistence of that belief). Hearing that there were plays in Chester he detoured to the city to see them. These were presumably the plays put on by Mayor Thomas Bellin for the visit of the Earl of Derby and his son, but the episode shows not only the continuing popularity of such productions but also the way that news of the performances spread.[24]

Without publicity, the plays could not succeed commercially. Presumably, when they were associated with the celebration of Corpus Christi in the fifteenth century, as an annual event they needed no publicity. In Chester, however, they were not only detached from that occasion some time between 1471 and 1521 and moved to Whitsun, but also faced competition from another event, the Midsummer Show.[25] Each year the mayor and council had to decide which of these two genres of civic celebration they would require, and the evidence for the later sixteenth century is that the Show was the more frequent choice. So the production of the plays was unusual and required special announcement. David Rogers indicates how the plays were publicised in the city:

> there was a man which did Ride as I take it vpon St. Georges daye throughe the Cittie and there published the tyme and the matter of the playes in breeife.[26]

In 1618–9, David elaborates; the man

> did ride warlike apparaled like st. George through euery streete with drume musicke and trumpetes and there was published that the playes were played that yeare.[27]

In the two later versions, he makes no mention of the reading or riding of the Banns. The allusion to St. George seems to indicate a need to affirm patriotic allegiance at a time when the performance of the plays might be held to be an act of papist rebellion and therefore to characterise only the later years of the Cycle. The Post–Reformation Banns, though undated, open as a formal envoy from above to the people:[28]

> Reverend lordes and ladyes all
> That at this tyme here assembled be
> by this message understand you shall
> that sometymes there was mayor of this Cittie ... 1–4

and the tone of address to the companies is minatory, directly addressed to the companies (*you)* and full of imperatives.

The character of the Herald projected by the Early Banns suggests something altogether less martial.[29] The rapport with the hearers is direct and easy:

> Lordinges royall and reverentt,
> Lovely ladies that here be lent,
> sovereign citizins, hether am I sent
> a message for to say.
> I pray you all that be present
> that you will here with good intent;
> and let your eares to be lent,
> hertffull I you pray. 1–8

The sly reference to his sponsors:

> Nedys must I rehers the Glover
> the give me gloves and gay gere 88–9

hardly suggests full armour, and his tone throughout is jocular — as when he offers the Wrights and Slaters the blessing of Octavian and his boy, which those in the know would recognise was Chester's gallows at Boughton. It has often been noted that these Early Banns are very much 'Roll up and see the show', stressing the spectacle of the carriages, especially that of the Mercers (61–71); the costumes, with Herod 'proud in paulle'

(59); and a few special effects, such as the Mappa Mundi (27) or Noah's ship (30). Praise words — *lovely*, *fair*, *good*, *best* — resonate through the account, and the stewards of the participating companies, who went with the Herald, were, as it were, called up and given their instructions. No similar arrangements are described for the Midsummer Show, which must therefore have been seen as the norm, though when the Puritan Mayor Henry Hardware junior sought to reform that Show in 1600 one thing that he introduced was

> a man in armore on horse backe, in white armor[30]

perhaps recalling the armed Herald of the later Play–Banns.

If the Plays were being 'sold' as popular entertainment for a mass audience in the Pre–Reformation Banns, the populist appeal of the Post–Reformation Banns is altogether more defensive but more blatant:

> If the same be lykeinge to the commons all
> then our desyre is satisfied, for that is all oure gayne. 42–3

The claim that this is not a production for self–advertisement or profit is repeated at the end of the Banns:

> Oure playeinge is not to gette fame or treasure ...
> 209

I do not think that we need take the claim at face value, but the remark seems to imply that others might have assumed some ulterior motive. And the Banns go on nervously to consider the possible objections that might be raised by an audience. The archaic language might lead the audience to condemn the content (49–55). The production overall might seem crude, not contrived

> in suche sorte and cunninge and by suche players of price
> as at this daye good players and fine wittes coulde devise.
> 194–5

Thus, our late–sixteenth–century audience is constructed as educated and critical, aware of modern staging and developments. Since these Banns cannot be later than 1575, it seems unlikely that they allude to professional companies visiting Chester; but they may be referring to the spectacular 'triumphs' such as that sponsored by William Crofton on the Roodee in 1566,[31] which was certainly to get 'fame', though not 'treasure'.

But the audience is asked to make an imaginative leap back to the original audience, socially and intellectually different from themselves:

By craftesmen and meane men these pageauntes are playde
and to commons and contry men accustomablye before.
If better men and finer heades now come, what canne be sayd?
But of common and contrye players take yow the storye. 203–6

This audience rôle–play requires them to respond to the Plays as a curious survival from the past, a commemoration of what the Banns proclaim in the fictitious history of their origins which forms the first part, as a revolutionary genre in its day (8–27).

These Banns presuppose both a reluctant acting–group and a sceptical audience, both of whom need to be convinced of the value of what they are doing. The address to the players is one of reassurance about the validity of what they are playing — that it is firmly grounded in Scripture or at least authorised texts — and that they are doing it for the good of the town and in celebration of the origins of their companies, which the Banns link in to the origins of the Plays. So acting commitment to deliver the text to the audience is emphasised from the start of the description of the plays, the Tanners on *The Fall of Lucifer*:

therefore be bolde
lustelye to playe the same to all the route,
and if anye therefore stande in anye dowbte
your author his author hath: your shewe lett be.
Good speeche! Fine playes! With apparell comlye! 65–9

Though seemingly addressed to the players, the command embraces both the performance and the audience reception of it. *Lustelye*, 'willingly; pleasingly; vigorously',[32] combines the disposition of the actor with the effect of the performance, while the implication is that both actors and audience may share a *dowbte* about the authority on which the plays are based. The final line, with its inclusive plural *playes* and the allusions to both text and costume, manages to combine an assurance of spectacle with a concern for content, envisaging an alert and thoughtful audience.

3. The Midsummer Show and its Audience

A useful correlative for the Plays is Chester's Midsummer Show, held on St. John's Eve. The various Mayors' Lists record its origins in the mayoralty of Richard Goodman, 1498–9; but David Rogers says that it was older than the Plays which he dates c.1327.[33] There is no necessary contradiction here — the Show may have been redesigned from an older

form in 1498–9. In 1671 the Cappers, Pinners, and Wiredrawers, petitioning the Assembly, declared their willingness to support the Show, an obligation that they had taken over from their involvement in the Plays:

> the said playes haue beene discontinued for many yeares past, and the Midsummer shew came upp (as your petitioner conceiues) instead thereof.[34]

Came up, meaning 'rose in importance',[35] suggests that the Show was by then believed to have developed as a substitute for the Plays.

We have no contemporary evidence for the Show's production before an order of 1563–4 placed with two members of the Painters' Company for:

> ffoure Ieans, won vnicorne won drombedarye, won Luce, won Camell, won Asse. won dragon, sixe hobby horses & sixtene naked boyes.[36]

This order not only characterises the Show. The figures are paid for by the Mayor, Aldermen, and Council at the cost of 40s. From the point of view of the companies, the fact that the City bore the primary costs was an advantage. For them, the cost in most cases at this time was limited to that of equipping a young boy with a costume, decking out a horse for him to ride, and paying men to hold him on it and lead the horse. For the Coopers in 1577 the amount directly assigned to the equipping was 1s 10d.[37] Compare that with the cost of putting on their play in 1575, stripped of explicit references to food and drink — 43s 10d.[38]

For some time a number of companies rode with characters found also in the Plays, which would impose a greater financial burden than riding with a boy. Among them Rogers mentions specifically the Devil in his feathers, Christ in strings, and the Ale–Wife with her cups and cans and attendant devils. And because David objects to them, he gives us some sense of the popular demand which determined the Show.[39] These characters were condemned by the Puritan preachers in Chester and Mayor Henry Hardware managed to suppress them in the 1600 Show. It is clear, however, that they enjoyed widespread support.[40] Part of this support derived from their status as a traditional civic custom; an annalist records of Hardware that

> he gate greate yll will Amonge the commons for Appooseinge hym selfe … agaynste oulde customes of this cittye.[41]

But it is evident from David Rogers's condescending comment that, whatever religiously committed civic leaders and humanist antiquarians might believe, the wider populace that constituted the audience enjoyed these figures and their antics:

> the vulgar [or baser sorte] of people did oppose themselves against the reformation of sinnes[42]

and in 1601–2 Mayor John Radcliffe restored the Show to its traditional form.[43] As late as 1614 the Mayor was insisting that the Cooks rode with their comic Ale–Wife and her attendant Devils — and it cost them 35s 10d to stage it.[44]

David was pleased when the Show was finally reformed — in the 1618-19 *Breviary* he praises its decorum.[45] And when the Earl of Derby urged its observance on the Mayor in 1669, he did so as a political act, signalling the restoration of the old order and continuity from the pre-Commonwealth period.[46] But the true value of the occasion to the citizens is seen in an order of 12 May 1672, when it was decided to move the, by then revived, Midsummer Show to Whit Tuesday:

> declareing the advantage and benefit which thereby may propably accrew and redound to this Citty by attracting very many (if not a multitude of people) therevnto, specially vpon this occasion to see the shew att that tyme, by whom noe little mony may bee expended within the said Citty ...[47]

The move was because business had fallen; takings at Midsummer had been poor because many traders had no apprentices to keep their shops open at Fair time. There is no argument here about ancient civic customs, only the money to be made from the customers attracted to Chester by the Show. However outsiders construed it, the Show was supported internally purely as a commercial enterprise, and its abandonment in 1678 suggests that the returns no longer justified the outlay; people were apparently not spending sufficient money in the town on that day to justify the outlay.

Conclusion

Despite the claims made by supporters of the Plays for religious edification, social cohesion, and customary practice, economic self–interest was the main justification for such civic customs in the eyes of the citizens. Hence, the attraction of crowds to spend money was the primary concern, and the reception of the plays and the well–being of the audience were necessary

considerations. The objections to the Plays centred finally, upon the high production costs. The Show provided a cheaper, more cost–effective alternative; but even that, in the end, failed to justify the outlay.

In Chester the customer was always right!

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NOTES

1. Original material used in this article was gathered for *REED: Cheshire*, a project undertaken with support from the Leverhulme Trust and the British Academy.
2. *A Middle English Treatise on the Playing of Miracles* edited Clifford Davidson (University Press of America, Washington, 1981) 51.
3. See, for example, Mervyn James 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town' *Past and Present 98–101* (1983) 3–29.
4. L.M. Clopper *REED: Chester* (Toronto UP, 1979) 27; hereafter, Clopper.
5. *MED* s.v. *prosperite* 1(a).
6. Denbigh County Record Office DD/PP/843. Words in square brackets here and in other citations indicate deletions.
7. Denbigh County Record Office.
8. Chester Archives MB/21 (1572–6) fols 212^{r}–213^{v}.
9. Chester Archives CHB/3 fol.28^{v}; *REED: Chester* 115.
10. Clopper.
11. Clopper 31.
12. On the breviaries of Archdeacon Robert and his son David Rogers, see Clopper, 27–36, and Steven E. Hart and Margaret M. Knapp *'The Aunchant and Famous Cittie': David Rogers and the Chester Mystery Plays* (Peter Lang, New York, 1988). Rogers' 1609 description of the Whitsun Plays is transcribed in Clopper 238–52.
13. Clopper 325.
14. Clopper 355.
15. Clopper 436.
16. Clopper 324–6.
17. Clopper 325.
18. Clopper 355.

19. For a discussion of the origin and significance of the Rows, see the collection of essays published in the *Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society* 67 (1985 for 1984), under the title *Galleries Which They Call The Rows*.
20. Chester City Archives Quarter Sessions Files QSF/61/6 (26 December 1612), fols 1^{r}–2^{r} (26 December): 'Anne Hesketh servant to Richard Werden gentleman Saith that yester eveninge this examinate standinge in the rowe over againste the doore of the dwellinge house of Mr William Leicester amongest others to see the Watche'.
21. Clopper 80–1.
22. Public Record Office, Pleadings, 1564–1570, CHES/15/2/N, (9 May 1570), fols 3^{r}–^{v}: 'this examinate hath sene the said wyddow Rodon at the grene vnder the walles by the mynster at a reherse of a playe which was to be playd; at whytsontyde followyng and this examinate haith allso sene her at the new tow ... at a nother tyme, when there was a nother playe rehersed'. I am grateful to Elizabeth Baldwin, my co–editor of *REED: Cheshire*, for this reference.
23. Cheshire County Record Office, Deposition book 1570–1574, EDC/2/9.
24. Chester Archives, Quarter Sessions Files QSF/30/71 (24 June, 1577, fol.1^{r}.
25. On the Show, see David Mills *Recycling the Cyle: The City of Chester and its Whitsun Plays* (Toronto UP, 1998) 85–100.
26. Clopper 239.
27. Clopper 325.
28. Quotations from the Banns are from R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Essays and Documents: with an essay 'Music in the Cycle' by Richard Rastall* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1983) 285-95.
29. Quotations are from Lumiansky and Mills *Essays and Documents* 278–84.
30. Clopper 198.
31. See Clopper 72–3.
32. *MED* s.v. *lustili*, sense 2.
33. Clopper 252: 'The midsomer "show" as antiant as the whitson playes, if not more aitiant [sic]'. On the problems of establishing the date of the Show's invention, see Clopper 93–94.
34. Chester City Archives, Assembly Files AF/40c/35 (4 August 1671).
35. *OED* s.v. *come up*, sense e.

36. Clopper 72.
37. Clopper 121. The expenditure was on gloves (8d), dressing the child (2d), inkle (2d), bridle and saddle–cloth (6d), and to 'thomas Radford desyring his good will for the childe in Tobert Anniions house' (4d).
38. Clopper 108–9. The bulk of the expenditure in that year was in refurbishing the carriage.
39. Clopper 253, 254.
40. For annals relating to this attempted reform, see Clopper 197–99.
41. Clopper 198.
42. Clopper 253.
43. Clopper 206, Mayors List 5.
44. Chester City Archives, Innkeepers' Company, Loose Papers G/13/42 (1613–14), single sheet.
45. Clopper 323: 'it is moste Comendable, rich, and beautifull'.
46. Chester City Archives, Mayor's File MF/87/46 (1669): 'I hope you (with the rest of your bretheren will take care that noting shalbe omitted that is of antient Custome in that Citty; this I expect from you & the rest'.
47. Chester Archives, AB/2 (12 May 1671), fol. 171^{r}.