CHAPTER 1

MEN IN THE HOUSEHOLD, GUILD, AND CITY

Generalizing about “guild life” in England in the late Middle Ages is a tricky business, to say the least. Only in London did the guilds become complex, orderly, bureaucratic “worlds within worlds.”¹ And new historicist attention to the idiosyncrasies of local culture prevents us from applying conclusions drawn from London’s model to just any English city. So the logical choice of sources for my study of the cycle dramas of York and Chester would seem to be the guild records of those two cities. And certainly there are printed and archival resources, both primary and secondary, from which to draw this information.² But even given these sources, there are gaps in the historical records we cannot fill. Most of the Chester guild records that survive are from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. And York, though more complete and more ancient in its historical record, still does not tell us everything we want to know, especially about the lives of guildsmen and the ways in which their guild identities and responsibilities did or did not play significant roles in their lives. It is part of my argument throughout this book that the plays themselves enact some of the more emotional and psychological aspects of guild life, particularly where gender expectations are concerned. But those plays are creating as well as responding to a social and cultural life intertwined with guild identity, and I must first establish some idea of what that culture in York and Chester was like, insofar as that is possible, both theoretically and practically. To do so, however, I must rely more on York than Chester for information, since its documentary resources for the late Middle Ages are far richer than Chester’s.

I do not intend this portion of my book to be a thorough history of guild life in northern England in the late Middle Ages and early modern periods. Rather, here I hope to address general aspects of guild and civic life that seem pertinent to an understanding of the plays. I also do not see this discussion as mere “background” to the artificially “foregrounded”

C. M. Fitzgerald, The Drama of Masculinity and Medieval English Guild Culture
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literary text of the plays, but rather as a part of a mutually constitutive cultural matrix with the plays that must be addressed first for the sake of clarity. Since the primary focus of this project as a whole is masculinity, it seems logical to begin with gender. How male-oriented were English guilds themselves and what roles, if any, did women play?

**Guilds and Gender**

It is no surprise that in the index of Stella Kramer’s 1927 book, *The English Craft Gilds: Studies in Their Progress and Decline*, there is no entry for either “women” or “female workers” or anything else designating the discussion of women and the guilds. Kramer’s book, like other early histories, relies entirely on documents comprising the official discourse of guild culture: public documents such as ordinances, legal disputes, correspondence with city councils, and the like. Women rarely show up in such records. To uncover women’s involvement in the economic life and guild culture of late medieval English towns, one must look at private records such as wills and indentures—as Heather Swanson in *Medieval Artisans* has done—which reveal a world more complicated than that constructed by the official discourses.

One of the purposes of my larger project is to show how the drama helped construct a world of guild activity that was masculine in ideology if not in reality. Of course, ideology can be a powerful tool for shaping reality; as Swanson puts it, “The sheer fact that the increasing number of written records articulated the social structure in terms of men, perhaps in itself demeaned the status of women and inevitably contributed to the denigration of their economic worth.” But despite such denigration, women did make a significant contribution to the economies of York, Chester, and other medieval English towns. As Martha C. Howell points out in the first sentence of the first chapter of *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities*, in what has surely become a commonplace idea in economic history, “In northern Europe during the late Middle Ages, the household was the most important center of economic production.” And in that household, multiple members, male and female, practiced multiple trades and handicrafts, despite Edward III’s 1363 ordinance requiring that “Artificers, Handicraft People, hold them every one to one Mystery,” and despite the conventional, nostalgic, and popular vision of a household working to assist the patriarch in his profession.

Although this book is concerned with the ways the drama contributed to the construction of urban masculinity, male roles can only be described and constructed vis-à-vis women, since to be a man in the Middle Ages was often defined by not being a woman. In what professions did women...