CHAPTER 9


The move to playing at Whitsuntide, then, is an important and extremely astute one on the part of Chester officials bent on preserving their civic drama. By playing also at Whitsuntide, they hedge their bet on the simultaneous continued performance of a procession and play at Corpus Christi (a move of which Bishop Bird, at least, would presumably have approved). Performance at Corpus Christi is highly charged, associated as it is with a traditional Catholic holiday and, in the characterization of the Early Banns, a procession featuring the “blessed Sacrament” (l. 161) at its center. Further, as we have seen, the two institutions primarily associated with the Corpus Christi procession, St. John’s and St. Mary’s, suffered substantially at the time of dissolution. Whitsuntide, on the other hand, with its Pentecostal message of the infusion of the Word, would become central to the Protestant calendar as presented in the Book of Common Prayer and elsewhere. Foxe’s 1570 title page, for example, prominently presents a Pentecostal scene, dominated by a preacher, on its lower left hand side, the side of the persecuted church. As Booty notes on the structure of the Prayer Book in relation to time:

Time was sanctified by the church’s liturgy: personal time, social and community time, all of time. From day to day the offices infused the Word, read and preached, into the lives of people and into the lives of the community.² (my emphasis)

In view of the central significance of this message of infusion, it is no surprise that Whitsunday 1549 serves as the target date for the required introduction of the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, according to its attached Uniformity Act.³
As already noted, the existence of two sets of Banns, separated in time, provides a valuable and unique index to shifting attitudes toward the cycle plays in Chester, especially since the Late Banns so clearly exhibit Protestant influence. Clopper’s examination of the records leads him to put “the extant version of the [Early] Banns in post-Reformation times...1539–40 establishes the terminus ad quem for the document as a whole.” Possible earlier versions and revisions notwithstanding, it makes sense to assume that the surviving version of the Early Banns was written concurrently with the Newhall Proclamation, which clearly announces the move of the plays to Whitsuntide. The Early Banns present, in a relatively straightforward fashion, the traditional listing of pageants along with the guilds that will perform them. They also reveal that by their date the plays were being performed during the three days of “Whitsonday-tyde”: Monday through Wednesday of “Whitson-weke” (ll. 148–53). Yet, as we have seen, in the background in the Banns, potentially as a reassurance to concerned citizens, is the traditional Corpus Christi play (ll. 156–71), and it seems probable, as Clopper has speculated, that the Early Banns were written to announce or commemorate the shift of the play from Corpus Christi day to Whitsunday and the movement from a one-day to a three-day play. As such, they work in tandem with Newhall’s Proclamation. We are told that the “mair of this citie, / with all this royall cominaltie” has ordained solemn pageants “at the fest of Whitsonday-tyde” (ll. 9–12) (the fishmongers “Wytsonday” pageant is also mentioned [ll. 124–7]). Once again a reforming impulse is evident—one that citizens are willing to accommodate in order to protect their plays, plays that are vital to the economic and social structure of the town, by moving them to a safe, even central festival day, well before the 1548 suppression of the festival of Corpus Christi.

The Late, or “Post-Reformation,” Banns evince an even clearer tendency to take account of and accommodate Reformation views: it seems logical to assume that they were in place early in Edward VI’s reign, at least by the suppression of Corpus Christi in 1548. No longer is a Corpus Christi procession or play mentioned or implied. Rogers’ Breviary, after neatly detailing the schedule of pageant performance on each of three days, refers to the plays as the “abomination of desolation”; however, the overall tone of the Banns themselves is not so uniformly negative. Clopper postulates three revisers, but seriously underestimates the effect of the composition when he characterizes the work of these revisers as either “apologetic” or merely “descriptive.” It is true that the Late Banns partly excuse and apologize for the material of the plays, yet, significantly, they partly reinvent it in Reformation terms as well.