CHAPTER 10

THE MISSING LINK: SPACES, PLACES, AND THE CHESTER WHITSUN PLAYS

On August 4, 1499, Prince Arthur, oldest son of King Henry VII, visited the town of Chester. Presumably he entered town by way of the Bridge-gate, just north of the bridge over the River Dee, the traditional beginning point for a royal entry—just as King James would over 100 years later in 1616. Royal visitors often combined a visit to Chester with a stop at the great Cheshire Abbey of Vale Royal just south of the city; it is not recorded whether Arthur made such a stop. He was no doubt formally greeted at the gate by town dignitaries, including the mayor and prominent citizens, as well as quite probably the powerful Abbot of St. Werburgh, John Birchenshawe. Ten years later, after Henry had issued a new charter to the city that substantially curtailed the abbot’s rights—limiting them to the Northgate area immediately adjacent to the Abbey—Birchenshawe’s access to such royal visitors might have been restricted; however, in 1499 he still enjoyed significant power.

After a suitable welcome, the group no doubt proceeded into town along the traditional route for a royal procession, “up Bridge Street to the Pentice.”¹ In fact, the Prince’s visit may have been intended at least in part to commemorate the completion of the Pentice, adjacent to St. Peter’s at the center of town.² After further ceremony, he continued to process north toward the Abbot’s domain at St. Werburgh, where, according to R.V.H. Burne, he saw the Assumption of Our Lady played before the Abbey gates.³ In fact, the Assumption was a topic particularly appropriate in the precinct of the Abbey, being the subject of the entire West Front of St. Werburgh—a project of Abbot Birchenshawe—as well as of the woodwork of the Abbot’s stall. On the West Front, on each side of the image of the Virgin is carved a royal shield, the one on the south side possibly being dedicated to Arthur himself.⁴ All in all, it must have been quite a spectacle.

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This incident can serve in several ways as an entrée to the continuation of our larger discussion of locational memory and specific Chester pageants. First, it is an example of formal civic ceremony that might provide an allusive context for other processional activities, such as the performance of the Whitsun plays. As Charles Pythian-Adams and D.M. Palliser have demonstrated, the church year between Christmas and Midsummer was alive with an abundance of ceremony and civic ritual. Second, the incident indicates the dynamic character of the cycle, since the Assumption play is no longer a part of the Whitsun cycle in any of the surviving manuscripts. Of course, it may not have been a cycle play at all, either Corpus Christi or Whitsun, that was played before Arthur; however, the Assumption of the Virgin appears to have been a part of the civic cycle at least until 1539, when Marian material began to be excised, and it is hard to imagine that the town fathers would not have taken advantage of this considerable resource in entertaining the visiting Prince. Finally, the performance indicates the way in which particular pageants might take on a special resonance when played in a particular town space or location—that is, in a particular context. This performance of the Assumption was not dependent for its effect upon a complete cycle of surrounding plays, nor is it recorded that, as the Whitsun plays apparently did, it moved on to be performed at other sites. Instead, the Abbey, with its recently remodeled western façade and history of association with the relics of the female St. Werburgh, was context enough.

In his section “The City as Actor,” Mills adumbrates some general locational correlations along lines that I would like to develop further here. He suggests ways in which the plays might allude to contemporary context by, for example, positioning the shepherds in their plays as Welshmen (and thus alluding to the Tudor dynasty as reconciling Wales and England), or casting the boy leading the blind man in Play 13 as yet another Chester beggar. In this chapter, I propose to further develop this line of thinking by putting forth three examples of specific pageants that, although included in the texts of the Whitsun “cycle,” might, according to the principles of locational memory outlined in this book, have taken on a special significance when performed in a particular town site. I have relied, for the most part, on documented sites of Whitsun play performance; however, I am arguing for special significance at a particular site. For the most part I am assuming “post-Reformation” performance, since the Whitsun sites themselves seem to have been identified no earlier than 1532. Although the order in which these examples will be presented is not, apparently, the actual order of production, I believe there is a conceptual logic to the order.