

The English Reformation and Theater : The Control of the stage, from the Reign of Edward V1 to that of Elizabeth 1

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In the reign of Edward VI, anti-Catholic plays flourished, reflecting the policies his Protestant government pursued. “An Act for the uniformity of service and administration of the sacraments throughout the realm,” known as the First Act of Uniformity, was enforced in 1548, forbidding interludes and plays despising Cranmer’s Common Prayer. This suggests that while encouraging plays against the Pope, the Edwardian government attempted to suppress any plays that might undermine the Reformation.

The mystery cycles were not totally banned under Edward VI. The official policy seems to have been directed at removing elements associated with the doctrines and practices of the Church of Rome rather than at suppressing the traditional religious plays.

In 1553, Mary I issued a proclamation for order and conformity in religion and banned the printing of books or the playing of interludes without the Queen’s “special license in writing.” It seems that Mary wished to avoid any religious controversy that might unsettle her reign and that she was more impartial than Edward VI in applying the laws against the stage. Despite the zealous Catholicism of the Queen, who was to restore England to papal obedience, there is no evidence that the government conducted vigorous dramatic propaganda in the interests of Catholicism. *Respublica*, performed at Court during the Christmas season in 1553, is the only extant anti-Protestant play known to have been produced during her reign.

With the death of Mary and the accession of Elizabeth I, religious dynamics were once again reversed. In 1559, “an Act for the uniformity of

common prayer and divine service in the church" (the Elizabethan Act of Uniformity) enforced the Edwardian Prayer Book and worship, and prohibited plays and interludes despising the Common Prayer. A proclamation issued in the same year, which contains the leading principles of Elizabethan dramatic control and censorship, prohibited unlicensed interludes and plays, especially on "either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the commonweal." In the early years of her reign, however, Elizabeth and her ministers seem to have encouraged, while ostensibly disowning, stage-polemic "in abuse and derision of the Catholic religion, of the mass, of the Saints, and finally of God." The government license of plays dealing with matters of religion did not last long. There is no proof that religious stage-polemic was encouraged in the 1570s or later except, perhaps, in 1588-89 when the Martin-Marprelate controversy took place.

The mystery plays declined in England under Elizabeth. Her policy toward the traditional religious stage was one of suppression, although at the beginning of the reign nothing seems to have been done to disturb people's enjoyment of the age-old pageants. At York, the performance of the Corpus Christi play was transferred to Whit-Tuesday in 1569. This was the last time the Corpus Christi play was acted in York. The Creed play was suppressed in 1568 and the text of the Pater Noster play fell into the hands of the Archbishop of York after a performance in 1572. The city corporation appears to have been unable to recover it. Thus, the religious drama came to an end in York. At Coventry, the Corpus Christi play was "laid down" in 1580. In 1591, the city council made an attempt to revive the old cycle, but finally decided that "the destruction of Jerusalem . . . shall be played on the pageants on Midsummer day and St Peter's day next in this city and no other plays." At Chester, the city authorities, "in contempt of an inhibition and the primate's letters from York and from the Earl of Huntingdon [Lord President of the North]," allowed the Whitsun plays to be performed for four days from Sunday to Wednesday after Midsummer Day in 1575. Sir John Savage, then mayor, was called before the Privy Council for sanctioning the prohibited plays. His inquisi-

tion served as a warning to the city authorities, demonstrating the government's increased determination to suppress the old religious stage. After 1575, the records contain no mention of the traditional religious plays in Chester.