

II.—THE NORTHERN STAGE.

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The modern drama arose within the ritual of the Christian church. Its origin was the series of dramatic religious ceremonies performed at Easter, when the Death and Resurrection of Christ were symbolised by the Deposition and Elevation of the Cross on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. An account has been preserved of these rites at Durham. An especially sacred crucifix was carried on Good Friday to the quire steps, where it lay on a cushion, and all the monks crept to it on their knees and kissed it. This crucifix, and an image of Christ with a cross in His hand, representing the Resurrection, were then laid in a sepulchre, 'all covered with red velvet and embroidered with gold,' which had been set up on the north side of the quire by the high altar. On Easter Sunday the image was solemnly brought out of the sepulchre, elevated and carried in procession round the cathedral, and then placed on the high altar. The crucifix was restored to its place on the second altar in the south alley of the lantern.¹

This was as far as the ceremony went in the cathedral, but there is extant a play modelled on the Easter liturgy written in the northern dialect during the first half of the fifteenth century. Unfortunately it is impossible to identify the author or the place where it was composed or acted. Apparently the author set out to write, not a drama, but a narrative poem, mainly in dialogue. The first fifteen lines are headed 'The prologe of this treyte or meditatione off the buryalle of Criste and mowrnynge therat,' and contain a request to 'Rede this treyte.' 'The first 419 lines have a few narrative phrases. . . . At this point the writer

¹ Fowler, *The Rites of Durham* (107 Surt. Soc. publ.), p. 12.

seems to have stopped these, crossed out such as he had already written, and inserted in the margin of his second page, 'This is a play to be playede, on part on gudfriday afternone, and the other part opon Esterday after the resurrectione, In the morowe, but at the begynnyng ar certene lynes [the prologue] which must not be saide if it be plaiede, which (a line cut off).'²

Professor Ten Brink says of this play:—'This sublime subject is here treated in a thoroughly worthy and church-like fashion. Everything which might disturb the devotion is avoided; not only comic elements, but all coarse realisms are entirely absent. All the performing personages belong to the congregation of the Saints—Joseph of Arimathaea, Nicodemus, the three Marys, the Holy Virgin, the Apostles, besides an Angel and Jesus Himself. A few interspersed Church hymns in Latin give the action a liturgical appearance. . . . The task which was to be accomplished here was, perhaps, the most difficult a medieval English dramatist ever undertook. The way in which it was performed shows one side of Northumbria's mental endowment at the summit of its power.'³

The Easter service was the first to be dramatised, but the Christmas service was almost equally suited to such treatment. Material objects, like the sepulchre, made a starting point for the acting of the ritual. Such were the cradle at Christmas, and the star at Epiphany, the former giving rise to the Christmas play of the Shepherds, the latter to the Twelfth Night play of the Star or the Three Kings.⁴

The Epiphany play is particularly interesting as it is the only one which can perhaps be located in the north. A few fragments

² Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, II, append. x, p. 432; Furnivall, *The Digby Plays* (E.E.T.S.), p. 171 *et seq.*

³ Ten Brink, *Hist. of Eng. Lit.* (Tran. Robinson), II, p. 287.

⁴ Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, II, chaps. xviii-xix.



of churchwardens' accounts for 1490 have been preserved at St. Mary's, Gateshead. The first of these contains a list of gifts of linen for vestments; forty-one and three-quarter yards were procured; besides an alb, a chaulese (chasuble?), an alb for a child, and a scarlet hood. Next there was 'a gathir in the kirke,' i.e. a collection, for a book, and another for the gilding of the church cross. There were expences for gilding and carving, and for carpenters' work in the church, for making up and mending vestments, for taking them to Durham to be hallowed, for painting the cross staff, and for making and painting the star. The presence of a star does not necessarily imply that there was a play, but when it is taken in conjunction with the other expences and preparations, particularly with the buying of a book, there is reason to suspect that an Epiphany play of some sort was in contemplation, to be performed in the church itself.⁵

The use of churches and of church vestments for theatrical performances is alluded to in the list of charges which the puritan Peter Smart brought against the dean and some of the prebendaries of Durham in 1630. One of his accusations was:—'You Richard Hunt, dean, with your associates ordained that the old communion-table of wood should be cast out of the church, which was done, and in place thereof you have set up a double table, very sumptuous, of stone, which you always call the Altar. . . . Moreover you have adorned the place where your Altar standeth with paintings and gildings, again and again, I know not how often, insomuch that it hath cost, besides the furniture, above 160*l*. Agreeable to it, you have provided much Altar furniture, and many massing implements, crucifixes, candlesticks, tapers and basins, and copes, one taken from mass-priests, adorned with images, and having the picture of the Blessed Trinity on the cape thereof, wrought in

⁵ Longstaffe, *Mem. of Ambrose Barnes* (50 Surt. Soc. publ.), pp. 261-2.

gold very bravely, which cope was carried about the town, from alehouse to alehouse, from tavern to tavern, and could not be sold till Ferdinand Morecroft, the thrifty treasurer of the church of Durham, bought it, to save some charges, and with it another old, rotten, ridiculous robe, (which they say cost 3s. 4d.) used by the boys and wenches of Durham above 40 years in their sports and May-games. These Babylonish and piebald robes, you, Francis Burgoine, brought to the Lord's Table, which the people seeing, thought and said, some of them, they should have a play.⁶

Although plays were still acted in churches as late as the Reformation, yet by the beginning of the thirteenth century the liturgical plays had become so long and so elaborate that they could no longer be performed as part of the service. They were transferred from the church to the churchyard, and thence to the market-place or to any other convenient open space. At the same time they passed out of the hands of the clergy into those of laymen. Sometimes they were taken over by the religious guilds which were attached to almost every church, but more frequently they became one of the duties of the craft guilds.

In 1311 pope Clement v established the festival of Corpus Christi. The leading ceremony of the day was a great procession in which the host, escorted by the local dignitaries, religious bodies, and guilds, was borne through the streets of the towns and displayed successively at out-of-door stations. As the feast of Corpus Christi was on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, it never took place until the days were long and there was a fair chance of fine weather. Hence the plays which had formerly been attached to Christmas and Easter, both dark and chilly seasons of the year, were in many cases transferred to the new festival, when all the guilds turned out in state. The simple liturgical plays developed into elaborate cycles, which dramatised

⁶ *Bishop Cosin's Corres.* (52 Surt. Soc. publ.), 1, pp. 169-72.

the whole of the Bible, from the Fall of the Angels to the Day of Judgment, besides introducing many apocryphal legends.⁷

A full description of the Corpus Christi procession at Durham is given in *The Rites of Durham*, written c. 1593:—

'There was a goodly procession upon the Place Green [Palace Green] on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday in the honour of Corpus Christi Day, the which was a principal feast at that time. The bailey, of the town did stand in the Toll Booth, and did call the occupations that was inhabiters within the town, every occupation in his degree, to bring forth their banner with all the lights appertaining to their several banners, and to repair to the Abbey Church door; every banner to stand a row in his degree from the Abbey Church door to Wyndshole Yett [Windy Gap]; on the west side of the way did all the banners stand, and on the east side of the way did all the torges stand pertaining to the said banners.

'Also there was a goodly shrine in St. Nicholas Church, ordained to be carried the said day in procession; called Corpus Christi shrine, all finely gilded, a goodly thing to behold, and on the height of the said shrine was a four squared box all of chrystal, wherein was enclosed the holy Sacrament of the altar, and was carried the said day with four priests up to the Place Green and all the whole procession of all the churches in the said town going before it, and when it was a little space within Wyndshole Yett it did stand still; then was St. Cuthbert's banner brought forth with two goodly fair crosses to meet it, and the Prior and Convent with all the whole company of the choir all in their best copes did meet the said shrine, sitting on their knees and praying. The Prior did cense it, and then carrying it forward into the Abbey Church, the Prior and Convent with all the choir following it. It was set in the quire, and solemn service done

⁷ Chambers, *op. cit.*, II, chap. xx.

before it, and "Te Deum" solemnly sung and played of the organs, every man praising God, and all the banners of the occupations did follow the said shrine into the church, going round about St. Cuthbert's feretory, lighting their torches and burning all the service time. Then it was carried from thence with the said procession of the town back again to the place from whence it came, and all the banners of the occupations following it, and setting it again in the Church, every man making his prayers to God did depart, and the said shrine was carried into the Revestry, where it remained until that time twelvemonth.⁸

The Corpus Christi plays are not mentioned in *The Rites of Durham*, and in fact they are wholly ignored by all writers on mystery plays whose works I have consulted. Nevertheless gild plays were undoubtedly performed there on Corpus Christi day in the fifteenth century. In 1450 the ordinances of the weavers' craft of Durham were enrolled in the bishop's chancery; among them was the injunction that the members of the craft must go in procession on Corpus Christi day, and 'playe and gar to playe the playe yat of old time longed to yaire craft.'⁹ There was a similar rule among the Cordwainers' ordinances enrolled in 1463¹⁰ and in the barbers' of 1468. The butchers' ordinary of 22 June, 1520, and the goldsmiths' of 12 May, 1532, mention the procession but not the plays.¹¹ These plays were old in 1450. They may have existed in 1395, where in the *Account Rolls of Finchale Priory*, a cell of Durham, there is an entry of gifts made 'Confratribus, ministrallis et aliis diversis,'¹² and they may have been performed as late as 1567, when 'the players of Durham' acted before the Newcastle corporation and were given 3l

⁸ Fowler, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁹ Dur. Curs. Rec. no. 44, m. 9, P.R.O.; Hutchinson, *Hist. of Dur.* II, 16 n.

¹⁰ Dur. Curs. no. 47, m. 14 d. P.R.O.

¹¹ Surtees, *Hist. of Dur.* IV, (2) pp. 21-22.

¹² Raine, *The Priory of Finchale* (6 Surt. Soc. publ.), p. 115.

reward.¹³ Peter Smart's remarks about the cathedral copes have already been quoted. They recall an entry in the Coventry accounts of 1544, when the pageant-masters bought 'a bysschops taberd of scarlet' from Trinity Church for Caiaphas.¹⁴

In addition to the craft gilds, the monks of Durham were patrons of the drama. At four great feasts of the year the prior of Durham withdrew to one of his country houses and there held 'ludi,' at which great sums were spent on eating and drinking, and numerous rewards were given to 'ministralli,' 'istriones,' 'cantores' and 'lusores.' The 'ludi' were not plays in themselves—sports would be a closer translation—but plays may have been performed then, and at the cell of Finchale there was a 'player-chamber' before 1464.¹⁵

Nothing is known about the Durham Corpus Christi plays, neither their subjects nor their number. There were twelve gilds when the town was incorporated by bishop Pilkington in 1565. It is to be observed that the Corpus Christi procession was an unusually brief one. It went only from St. Nicholas's church in the market-place up the short, steep hill to Palace Green. Plainly there was no time for performance of plays on the way, and probably the acting took place at some fixed spot after the service in the cathedral.

There appears to be no trace of the text of the plays, but in this connexion an interesting point arises. There is extant the MS. of a cycle of mystery plays known as the 'Ludus Coventriae.' The early history of this MS. is unknown; it was in the Cotton library, and was placed with the rest of that collection in the British Museum. The MS. itself bears the following notes:—

¹³ Richardson, *Extracts from the Municipal Accounts of Newcastle-upon-Tyne*, p. 17.

¹⁴ *Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* (E.E.T.S.), Append. II, p. 86.

¹⁵ Chambers, *op. cit.*, II, append. E. (1), where the references are collected from the *Durham Account Rolls*, etc.

- (1) A date 1468 written half-way through.
- (2) At the beginning the signature 'Robert Hegge, Dunelmensis,' and later, 'Ego R. H. Dunelmensis Possideo.'
- (3) On the fly-leaf in an Elizabethan hand 'The plaie called Corpus Christi.'
- (4) A note in the hand of Richard James, Cotton's librarian c: 1630, stating that these plays were called 'Ludus Coventriae,' and were acted by monks or mendicant friars.¹⁶

It is not possible or necessary to enter into the controversy which rages over this MS., but one aspect of it is interesting for the present purpose. Several competent scholars, though not all, believe that James was mistaken, that the plays were not acted by monks or friars, and did not belong to Coventry, but that they are the cycle played by the craft guilds of some unidentified town, and as the only previous owner who is known was Robert Hegge of Durham, it is at first sight possible that Durham may have been that town. On this point all subsequent writers have been content to quote the first editor of the 'Ludus Coventriae,' Halliwell-Philipps, who says, that the conjecture that the manuscript came from Durham 'is not supported by any evidence and very little probability.'¹⁷ They ignore the fact that Robert Hegge (1599-1629) is not a name and nothing more. He was so far interested in Durham antiquities that he wrote *The Legend of St. Cuthbert*. His father, Stephen Hegge, a public notary of Durham, was also an antiquary, who made copies of his son's book and of *The Rites and Monuments of Durham*, now in bishop Cosin's library, Durham.¹⁸ Robert Hegge's maternal uncle, Robert Swift, had a large library, of which he bequeathed the greater part to his

¹⁶ Chambers, *op. cit.*, II, append. x.

¹⁷ Halliwell [Philipp], *Ludus Coventriae* (Shakespeare Soc.), p. 8.

¹⁸ Fowler, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

'true brother and friend, Stephen Hegge,' in 1599-1600.¹⁹ Thus Robert Hegge belonged on both sides to families who delighted in books and antiquities, and was the very person to find and preserve the mystery-plays of Durham.

In view of all the dramatic activity at Durham which has been described above, it does not seem altogether unreasonable to suppose that the 'Ludus Coventriae' had some connexion with the town. The great objection to this is the language in which the plays are written. Halliwell-Phillipps considered that it was the dialect of Coventry, but later authorities regard it as East Midland. The play of 'The Resurrection' contains a speech taken from the thirteenth century East Midland poem of 'The Harrowing of Hell.'²⁰ But although the main body of the plays are East Midland in language, there is one play 'The Assumption of the Virgin' which has been added in a later hand, and is in the northern dialect.²¹ It is also a characteristically northern subject. At Newcastle 'The Burial of the Virgin' was performed, at Beverley 'The Coronation of the Virgin,' at York 'The Death of the Virgin,' 'The Funeral of the Virgin,' 'The Appearance of the Virgin to St. Thomas of India,' and 'The Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin.'

It may be conjectured that the manuscript was compiled in the East Midlands, but that it was brought to Durham, where the play of 'The Assumption of the Virgin' was added early in the sixteenth century. The East Midland characteristics of the plays are not a bar to their connexion with Durham, as the monastery of Durham had a cell near Stamford, and held large estates in Lincolnshire.²²

In contrast to Durham, the history of the gild-plays of Newcastle-upon-Tyne is fairly clear. The Corpus-Christi plays

¹⁹ *North Country Wills and Inventories* (112 Surt. Soc. publ.), III, p. 175.

²⁰ Pollard, *English Miracle Plays*, p. 38.

²¹ Ten Brick, *op. cit.*, II, p. 285.

²² *V.C.H. Dur.* II, p. 92.

are first mentioned in the ordinary of the coopers' craft dated 20th January, 1426/7. Then follow references in the ordinaries of the skimmers and glovers, 1436, smiths 1437, barbers 1442, slaters 1451, saddlers 1459, fullers and dyers 1477, goldsmiths 1536, armourers 1545, merchant adventurers 1552, cooks 1575, millers 1578, house-carpenters 1570, masons 1581. In the later cases the plays are described as 'the ancient play of the fellowship,' showing that they had been performed for some time before the date.²³

It is possible to make out part of the cycle which was performed in Newcastle. It contained the following plays:

- (1) The Creation of Adam: by the Bricklayers and Plasterers.
- (2) Noah's Ark: by the Shipwrights.
- (3) The Offering of Isaac: by the Slaters.
- (4) The Deliverance of the Children of Israel out of the Thralldom, Bondage and Servitude of King Pharaoh: by the Millers.
- (5) The Three Kings of Cologne: by the Goldsmiths, Plumbers, Glaziers, Pewterers and Painters.
- (6) The Flying of Our Lady into Egypt: by the Bricklayers and Plasterers.
- (7) The Baptizing of Christ: by the Barbers, Chirurgions and Chandlers.
- (8) The Last Supper: by the Fullers and Dyers.
- (9) The Bearing of the Cross: by the Weavers.
- (10) The Crucifixion: by the Saddlers.
- (11) The Burial of Christ: by the House-Carpenters.
- (12) The Descent into Hell: by the Tailors.
- (13) The Burial of Our Lady St. Mary the Virgin: by the Masons.²⁴

²³ Brand, *Hist. of Newcastle-upon-Tyne*, II, pp. 359, 370, 371.

²⁴ O. Waterhouse, *The Non-cycle Mystery Plays* (E.E.T.S.), p. 39.



The cycle is given by Waterhouse, with the exception of the saddlers' play, which, however, is mentioned by Bourne, *History of Newcastle-upon-Tyne*, p. 21, n.g.: 'This Company (the Saddlers) has belonging to it an ancient Manuscript, beautifully wrote, in Old English Rhime; it relates to our Saviour's Sufferings. I take it to be the play they were obliged by their Ordinary to maintain on the Feast of Corpus Christi.' This manuscript was therefore extant about 1730, when Bourne wrote, but Brand apparently could not find it in 1789. It is deeply to be regretted that Bourne did not print the saddlers' play as well as the shipwrights.'

In addition to the thirteen plays of which the subjects are known, there were the plays, with unknown subjects, of the coopers, smiths, skimmers, cooks, barkers and tanners, armourers and vintners.²⁵ The merchant adventurers produced four plays, besides the town play, which was a separate affair.²⁶ They were probably responsible for the plays of the drapers, mercers, and boothmen, who had been amalgamated with the merchant adventurers. One of these companies must have acted 'The Flood,' as a sequel to the extant 'Building of the Ark.' There must have been at least twenty-four plays, and as some of the crafts acted more than one, there may have been a much larger number.

Three lists of expenses and properties for the plays have been preserved. The earliest is from the book of the fullers and dyers. It is particularly interesting as it shows that the subject of the play, which is not mentioned by name, was 'The Last Supper.'

²⁵ Brand, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 312, 314.

²⁶ Dendy, *Merchant Adventurers of Newcastle* (101 Surt. Soc. publ.), II, p. 164.

'1561. The charggs of the play this yere.

The play lettine to Sir Robert Hert, Sir William Hert, George Walker,
Robert Murton . . . 9s.

First for the rehersall of the play before ye craft . . . 10s.
Item for a mynstrell ye nyght . . . 3d.
Item for paynting the gere . . . 10s.
Item for a salmone trout . . . 15d.
Item for the maundy loaves and cakes . . . 2s. 8d.
Item for wyn . . . 3s. 6d.
Item for 3 yerds and a d lyn cloth for God's coot . . . 3s. 3d. ob.
Item for ye hoysse and cot makyng . . . 6d.
Item for a payr of gloves . . . 3d.
Item for the care and banner berryng . . . 20d.
Item for the carynge of the trowt and wyn about the towne . . . 12d.
Item for the mynstrell . . . 12d.
Item for two spares for stanges . . . 6d.
Item for drynk and thayr suppers that wated of the paient . . . 5s.
Item for tentor hooks . . . 3d.
Summa totalis . . . 50s. ob.
Item to the clerk this yere because of the play . . . 2s.'

The slaters played 'The Sacrifice of Isaac,' and their
expences in 1568 were:—

'The plaers for thear dennares . . . 3s.
Item for wyne . . . 8d.
Item for the rede clothe . . . 2s.
Item for the care . . . 20d.
Item for four stoopes . . . 6d.
Item for draenke . . . 6d.
Item for the bearers of the care and baneres . . . 18d.
Item in drencke . . . 3d. to them that bare the care, and 1d. to the plaers
in drencke and 2d. the horse mete . . . 6d.
Item for the pyper . . . 8d.
Item for rosemare . . . 2d.
Item for detten [dighting] of the sweards . . . 2d.
Item for charcole . . . 2d.
Item for the detten for the crounes . . . 2d.
Item to Bertram Sadler for plaers when they came home from the playe
in mete and drenk had . . . 6d.²⁷

²⁷ Brand, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 370-1n.

On the first leaf of the goldsmiths' book is the entry : —

5 March, 1598 [1598-9].

An invoice of all the players aperell pertaining to the goldsmiths, plumers, pudurers, glaciers and paynters.

By beards to the kynges three and for the messonger one with theyr head hayers.

Item three cappes, and thre septers and thre crownes.

Item one sterne and twey crownes.

Item box with our ordenarie and oure playe book.²⁸

The only play which has been preserved is the shipwrights' play of 'The Building of the Ark.' This was printed in Bourne's *History of Newcastle-upon-Tyne* [1736] p. 139, but in a very much corrupted form. The MS. which Bourne used is lost. It is believed to have been a sixteenth century copy of an earlier version of the play, which is conjectured to have been composed in the first half of the fifteenth century. It has been emended by F. Holthausen in *Goteborgs Hogskolas Arskrift*, vol. III (1897) and by R. Brotanek in *Anglia* vol. XXI, p. 165. A text with a minimum of emendation is printed by O. Waterhouse in *Non-Cycle Miracle Plays* (E. E. T. S. extra Ser. vol. 104) p. 19.

The play is written in markedly northern dialect, and concerns only 'The Building of the Ark;' one of the other crafts probably acted the sequel of 'The Flood.' A similar division was made in the York plays and in the 'Ludus Coventriae,' but the Newcastle play compares very favourably with the corresponding play in the York cycle. The latter is simply a bald and dull dialogue between God and Noah. In the 'Ludus Coventriae' Noah and his wife and family are all introduced, and an Angel brings the message, as in the Newcastle play, but it also is monotonous and without originality. Three new characters have been introduced into the Bible story in the Newcastle play, an angel, Noah's wife, and the Devil. 'The introduction of the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 371n.

Angel was doubtless intended to increase the spectacular effect,—the chief consideration in the early fifteenth century,—although at the same time it increased the dramatist's difficulties, since it necessitated God's command appearing twice; this the writer obviated somewhat, by making the Angel address to Noah much that was not in his original message, and omitting very much that was.

Noah's wife, usually a comic character, appears in all the extant mystery plays about the Flood, but the devil is peculiar to the Newcastle version. From the allusion that he makes to his 'crooked snout,' it is clear that he wore a grotesque mask. By the introduction of the devil the construction of the play approaches one step nearer to the form of the Morality. To the devil, too, is entrusted the part of speaking the epilogue, and he concludes the play in a spirit quite in harmony with the comedy that has preceded.²⁹

Brotanek suggests that the temptation of Noah's wife by the devil is a reminiscence of the temptation of Eve by the serpent in the York plays. He also thinks that the scene in which Noah's wife makes him drunk in order to discover the secret of his mysterious labours is adapted from the story in Genesis about Noah's drunkenness after the Flood.³⁰

Mr. Waterhouse remarks that 'the description of the shipwright's tools and materials goes exhaustively into details and shows that the author had an intimate knowledge of the trade, or else was assisted by one of the members of the craft.' He adds that the realism and comedy of the piece are almost on a level with the famous second Shepherds' play of the Towneley Cycle, the high-water mark of English mystery plays.³¹

The cost of the plays was borne by the craft guilds. The tailors on 8 October, 1536, decreed that every apprentice should

²⁹ Waterhouse, *op. cit.*, p. 36 et seq.

³⁰ Brotanek, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-4.

³¹ Waterhouse, *loc. cit.*

pay 4*d.* a year, every hireling 3*d.* a year, and every person made free of the craft 8*d.* towards the play on admission.³² The saddlers ordered on 6 March, 1459 [-60] that each brother should be at the procession when his hour was assigned under a penalty of 40*d.* The penalty was one pound of wax among the barkers and tanners, smiths, coopers, armourers, and slaters.³³ A similar forfeit was paid by a defaulting fuller, and in that company each brother paid 6*d.* yearly to the procession and play.³⁴ The penalty for failing to attend the procession was 6*d.* in the weavers' company, and 2*s.* 6*d.* in the masons', while the millers' penalty was 20*s.*³⁵ In 1550-1 the vintners made a collection for the play.³⁶ The barbers, chirurgions and chandlers were bound to be at the procession when the hour was assigned at the New Gate, under a penalty of one pound of wax.³⁷

It is not quite clear what the fullers and dyers did when they let the play to four persons, as they evidently bore the expences themselves. Perhaps these four, two of them being priests, were the stage managers.

It is difficult to determine exactly how the plays were performed. The fullers and dyers evidently had a rehearsal before the actual performance, as they were bound to meet on the eve of Corpus Christi day at six o'clock in the morning,³⁸ and the rehearsal is mentioned in their accounts. From an order of the merchant adventurers it appears that the Corpus Christi procession started from the Meal Market at seven o'clock in the morning.³⁹ It must have extended from the market to the New Gate, where it was joined by the barbers' company. The barbers' ordinary of 10 October, 1442, expressly states that the company must walk in the procession and afterwards play their play,⁴⁰

³² Brand, *op. cit.* II, p. 315.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 316, 317, 319, 344, 349, 350.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 239, 346, 348.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 371*n.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 224*n.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

and in the saddlers' ordinary of 4 February, 1532-3, they were enjoined 'immediately after their procession done. Then their pagions (pageants) to them accustomed to be set forth in due order . . . without any contention or any delay.'⁴¹ Therefore there was first the Corpus Christi procession, which set out from the Meal Market at 7 o'clock on Corpus Christi morning, and later the plays were acted. The companies walked in this procession, each man wearing his livery.

The next question is whether the plays were performed on the same day after the procession, or on the next day. A lawsuit of 1568 throws some light on this point. Sir Robert Brandling died that year, and there was a dispute over his will. His brother Henry Brandling deposed that he had spoken to Sir Robert about his will on Trinity Sunday, 1568. About ten or twelve days after Whit Sunday, that is, during the week after Trinity Sunday, Henry Brandling received a message from Sir Robert on the same subject, and on the Friday of that week, the very day on which he died, Sir Robert said that he would have his lawyer after dinner to draw a draft of his will, for *after the plays* he would send for his counsel and make it up. He died before seeing either the plays or his lawyer.⁴² From this statement it is clear that the performance took place on Friday, whereas Corpus Christi day was always Thursday. There was nothing very surprising in this, as both the procession and the plays took up a good deal of time, and it was difficult to fit both into one day. The same division was made at York in 1426, when the plays took place on Corpus Christi day and the procession on the following day.⁴³

The last question is whether the plays were given all together in one place, or whether they were carried about the town and

⁴¹ Ordinary of the Saddlers in the possession of Mr. Andrews.

⁴² Welford, *Newcastle and Gateshead*, II, p. 416.

⁴³ L. Toulmin Smith, *York Plays*, p. 34.



performed at several different stations. From the expences for horses and for carrying the car, etc., in the extant accounts, it appears that the latter was the method of representation at Newcastle, as it was at York. The pageants probably began, like the procession, in the Meal Market. There the bricklayers and plasterers must have opened the proceedings by performing 'The Creation of Adam.' When the performance was over, the pageant moved on to the next station, and the play was repeated. Meanwhile the company next in order gave a second play in the Meal Market, and then followed 'The Creation of Adam' to the next station. Thus each play was acted as many times as there were stations in the town.

Henry Brandling's evidence shows that in 1568 the plays were still a regular and normal part of town life, but ten years later it appears that they were acted only occasionally by the special command of the mayor and corporation. The Corpus Christi plays are mentioned by name for the last time in the masons' ordinary of 1581,⁴⁴ and about that time it may be assumed that they were given up as public performances. The individual companies, however, may have kept them up for their private amusement some time longer. From an order of 1536 it appears that the goldsmiths were in the habit of having a representation of their play at their feast or annual meeting,⁴⁵ and they still had their players' apparel and the book of their play in 1598-9.

The drama now began to be a private entertainment as well as a public ceremony. The minstrels of great noblemen gave representations of mystery plays in their lord's chapel, and in course of time they invented new plays, some dealing with modern miracles or the lives of the saints; others purely secular and drawn from the old romances.⁴⁶ They seem, however, to have been particularly attracted by the morality plays which the

⁴⁴ Brand, *op. cit.*, I, p. 372.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

⁴⁶ Chambers, *op. cit.*, II, chap. xxiv.

clergy began to perform early in the fifteenth century.⁴⁷ In these the characters were not supposed to be real persons, but were the personification of vices and virtues. They were easily detached from the church and were adopted by the minstrels, as they were more convenient than the elaborate cycles of the mystery plays for a touring company. A morality play could usually be performed by a small number of actors in little more than an hour, and as a rule required no elaborate stage effects. It could be given equally well out of doors or indoors. The company of minstrels probably acted their plays first before their lord in his hall. Then on tour they performed in the churchyard or market place or village-green⁴⁸ of their various stopping-places. But they were equally ready to act in the town-hall or the church, or in the house of some local magnate. Strolling players performed in the player-chamber at Finchale which has already been mentioned. In 1532-3 the king's players performed before the monks, and in the same year four players of the earl of Derby's household acted there and received 7s. 6*d.* in gold as a reward.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Waterhouse, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁴⁸ There are still extant plans of these open-air theatres, 'which enable one to picture the coming of the speaker [of the Prologue] and his flag bearers to a country town or village, his announcing the performance of the play in a week's time, the preparing of the site, the arrival of the waggon of scaffold-materials and properties, the putting up of the scaffolds, and ring of poles or posts and ropes, the gathering of the audience round the outer circle of scaffolds on which the chief players stood, leaving the inner circle free for the performance itself.' There is a place near Penrith, now called 'King Arthur's Round Table,' which bears a strong resemblance to these plans. 'It is a circular turf platform about 20 yards in diameter, surrounded by a shallow ditch, and a raised bank that might have been used for spectators . . . there are two earth causeways over the ditch.' Its history and purpose are quite unknown, but 'it would have been admirably adapted to the performance of plays in the manner suggested by [the plans].' (*The Marco Plays*, E.E.T.S. p. 33, and p. 2 in additional notes).

⁵⁰ Chambers, *op. cit.*, II, append. E. (1).

The severe statutes against vagrants which were passed in the middle of the sixteenth century made it absolutely necessary that these wandering companies should have the protection of some nobleman's name, although their connexion with their patron soon became merely nominal. The custom was that 'when players of Interludes come to town, they first attend the mayor, to inform him what nobleman's servants they are and so to get licence for their public playing: and if the mayor like the actors, or would show respect to their lord and master, he appoints them to play their first play before himself and the alderman and common council of the city; and that is called the mayor's play, where every one that will comes in without money, the mayor giving the players a reward as he thinks fit, to show respect unto them.'⁵¹

There are numerous examples of this custom in the corporation accounts of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In July, 1562, the mayor caused 20s. to be given to the duchess of Suffolk's players, who must have spent two or three months in the neighbourhood, as they were given 12*d.* for drink in September.⁵² They performed in the merchant court, the upper chamber of the Maison Dieu,⁵³ which was the usual theatre for the first or mayor's play. In July, 1564, the earl of Bedford's players received 20s.⁵⁴ In December, 1565, the earl of Worcester's players performed in the merchant court, where the chamber was lighted by 3 lbs. of wax candles, provided by the town at a cost of 2s.; the players were given 20s.⁵⁵ In September, 1577, the earl of Leicester's players received 50s.⁵⁶ In October, 1590, the earl of Worcester's players came again and received 30s., while in the same month the earl of Hertford's players also visited the town and received 40s.⁵⁷ In May, 1593, a company composed of the Lord Admiral's players and Lord Morley's players received 30s.; in

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 189*n*, quoting Willis, *Mount Tabor* (1639).

⁵² Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁵³ Longstaffe, *Mem. of Ambrose Barnes* (50 Surt. Soc. publ.), p. 91.

⁵⁴ Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 14. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.* ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20. ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

September of the same year the earl of Sussex's players received 40s., and later in the same month there was 'paid to the Erle of Sussex plaiers in full paymente of 3*l.* for playing a free play, commended by Mr. Maiore, 20s.'⁵⁸ In October, 1593, there was 'given in reward to my lord Darcies players, 20s.' In April, 1599, 20s. were given to Lord Stafford's players.⁵⁹

In October, 1600, there was a performance at the merchant court before the mayor and his brethren of 'the comedie of Terence.' A thief slipped in and stole a blue coat belonging to one of the attendant sergeants at mace, and a cap, a pair of embroidered hangars, and a pair of double silk slippers, which belonged to the players. The mayor generously replaced the stolen goods at a cost of 36s. 4*d.*⁶⁰

At this point, unfortunately, the corporation accounts become fragmentary, with gaps for long periods, and consequently it is impossible to trace the later visits of players to the town, but it appears that at the beginning of the seventeenth century Newcastle had a reputation for its interludes. A very curious play called 'The Love-sick King' was printed in London in 1655, the author being Anthony Brewer. It is believed to have been written long before the date of publication, perhaps as early as 1605. The underplot of this play relates to Roger Thornton, the great Newcastle merchant; the scenes are laid in Newcastle, and the praises of the town are sung so vigorously that it may safely be inferred that the play was written for production there. In act II a Newcastle merchant, Goodgift, and his wife, discover Thornton composing his famous rhyme:—

"Here did Thornton enter in
With hope, a half-penny and a lambskin."

The merchant thinks that the man is mad, but his wife suggests 'Is he not, think you, husband, one of those players of interludes that dwells at Newcastle, and conning of his part?'

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Another local character is Grim the collier, a fictitious being who occurs in Elizabethan drama as early as 1571. He was the personification of the coal-trade, which was then a new development of commerce. Grim the collier was a stock character of the same type as the grimy chauffeur who occurs in so many topical comedies of the present day.

There is one very modern touch. A shout is heard, and one of the characters on the stage asks:—

'How, now, what mean these shouts?'

To which Grim replies:—

'I think there's some match at foot-ball towards, the colliers against the whole country, cut and long tail.'

In 'The Love-sick King' Roger Thornton and Grim the collier are represented as being the contemporaries of King Canute, king Ethelred, king Alfred, and king Malcolm of Scotland. Thornton, after making an immense fortune, builds the walls of Newcastle, and is created first mayor of the town by king Alfred.⁶¹ A work so unhistorical and so ill-written could only have been produced by a local demand for that sort of thing. It is not, on the one hand, an antiquarian freak, because the author knew nothing about antiquity, and it is not, on the other hand, the work of a really talented man, who might have accidentally pitched upon the locality. Therefore it was probably written by a local hack for the local stage.

Although the Newcastle corporation accounts are defective for the earlier part of the seventeenth century, it is possible to find a few more particulars about the strolling players in *The Household Books of Lord William Howard of Naworth*. It may be assumed that any company which penetrated so far north as Brampton would be sure to visit Newcastle. In these, as in the corporation accounts, there are numerous references to the strollers who were not actors, the dancers, singers, tumblers and

⁶¹ *Proc. Soc. Antiq.*, 3rd ser., VIII, pp. 87-90.

exhibitors of wild beasts, besides the town waits and the wandering pipers and harpers, but these do not concern the present subject.

On 12 August, 1618, the prince's players received 10s. at Naworth. On 31st October, 1620, a dancer was given 20s. and a company of players 10s.; this was an unusually gay year, for on 16th February, 1620-21 the prince's players again visited Naworth and again received 10s. On 31st September, 1621, a company of players was given only 5s. In the same year on December 17th, mistress Mary, Lord William's youngest daughter, went to a play at Brampton and spent 7s. 6d. Some of the payments seem to have been made to country people who were performing their local play, not to professional actors. Instances of this occur on 17 November, 1622 (St. Hugh's day) when 3s. were given to the players of Penrith, on 18 April, 1623, when a company of players at Cumcach received 5s., and on 5 January 1624-5 (the eve of Twelfth Night) when the players of Warwick [Bridge] received 22s. When 'a company of players' alone is mentioned, they were probably strollers, as in the case of the company who received 5s. at Naworth on 13 July, 1629, and another who received 10s. on 12 September, 1633.⁶²

This is the last reference to players in the *Household Books*. The times were growing more and more troublous, and the players were probably frightened from their northern tours before the Scots invaded England in August, 1640. The war reduced the north to so suffering a condition that acting was not likely to be popular. Then came the puritan rule, when stage plays were prohibited altogether. People were taught that to act was a degradation and that to see a play was a sin. Of course, this did not prevent them from acting and seeing plays, but it gave these

⁶² Ornsby, *Household Books of Ld. Wm. Howard* (68 Surt. Soc. publ.), pp. 87, 130-1, 175, 182, 193, 215, 263, 318.



pursuits the unwholesome zest of wrong-doing, in place of the former innocent and natural pleasure.

Even during the Commonwealth the players began to creep back to Newcastle. When Ambrose Barnes was a magistrate, shortly before the restoration, 'he began a reformation at the heads of the town, setting a good guard upon all balls, masquerades, shows and plays, doing whatsoever in him lay that officers should give a good example.'⁶³ From this it appears that there must have been some plays on which he might keep his eye, but there is a complete gap in the theatrical annals of the north from the Restoration in 1660 until the beginning of the northern newspapers in 1711. It is evident that strolling companies must have visited the town during this period from time to time, as in 1711 'an order was made at the Northumberland Michaelmas Sessions that the Moot Hall should not be let for the performance of plays, or other purposes, without the consent of five justices.' The justices were not inexorable, however, as on 8 December, 1716, the Moot hall was let to Mr. Peirson and his company.⁶⁴

Meanwhile York had become the fashionable centre of the north. James duke of York, afterwards James II, was in the habit of withdrawing there during his brother's reign, when London became too hot to hold him, on account of his religion. He probably originated the fashionable winter season in York, which the county families found more economical than a London season, and equally entertaining. About the beginning of the eighteenth century a subscription of 15*s.* per head was raised among the fashionable frequenters of the city to secure a company of players who performed twice a week throughout the winter. 'They are allowed,' wrote Drake in 1736, 'to be the best strollers in the kingdom.'⁶⁵ After the winter season at York this company

⁶³ Longstaffe, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁶⁴ *Arch. Ael.*, 2 ser. iv, p. 235.

⁶⁵ Drake, *Eboracum*, p. 240.

toured through the surrounding counties, playing in the towns where a concourse of people might be expected for races or assizes.⁶⁶

The York company was the first of the stock companies, but their day had not yet come farther north. Until 1747 there was not a permanent theatre within the counties of Durham and Northumberland. The strolling companies stayed for a month or six weeks and performed in any large hall which they could hire; the town hall, the moot hall, the assembly rooms, a large room in an inn, a big workshop, a temporary booth, all were utilized. Occasionally there was a winter season in Newcastle, when a single company remained for three months or more and acted twice a week. On one most exciting occasion in 1728 there were two companies in the town during Race Week, both performing *The Beggars Opera*, of which the theatre-goers must have become rather weary.⁶⁷

The condition of the travelling players was often exceedingly miserable. George Frederick Cooke described one of the provisional theatres in his diary:—‘We dressed, male and female, in one room; the dressing-room was at the audience end of the house, and we had to pass through them to reach the stage, which was no higher than the floor, the whole theatre being a large room in a public house—I have forgotten the sign.’⁶⁸

The lesser towns were visited but rarely by the strollers. Cooke himself passed his boyhood at Berwick, and his passion for the stage was awakened by a visit of the Edinburgh company in 1766-7, when they performed in the town-hall. In 1769 and 1770 the players were again in the town, and in the latter year they converted an old malt-house into a theatre. All the boys of the neighbourhood exercised the utmost ingenuity to gain admission to the performances, without payment if possible, and

⁶⁶ *Arch. Ael.*, 2 ser. iv, p. 236.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Dunlap, *Memoirs of G. F. Cooke*, I, p. 24.

between whiles got up plays of their own, to the indignation of their relatives and masters, but to their own very great enjoyment. It is remarkable what classical drama these youngsters attempted—*The Fair Penitent*, *Hamlet*, *The Revenge*, and *Cato*, varied by the opera of *Love in a Village*.⁶⁹

The old conditions of acting prevailed in the small Northumbrian towns until the end of the century. In August, 1786 there was a strolling company at Alnwick, and on August 23rd, 'Charles Grey (the new member for the county) desired a play, to wit, "The Beau's Stratagem" with a farce "The Poor Soldier;" he attended with a great company of gentlemen.'⁷⁰ In the winter of 1787 'Mr. Strickland's comedians' had a season at Alnwick. The duke of Northumberland gave them a guinea every night they acted. 'At their conclusion for the season his Grace gave them each two guineas at the Castle and ordered a supper at the Black Swan for them, with a decent quantity of liquor.' The duke's charity must have been very acceptable, for the company was in a bad way. Strickland was ill, and the players were 'very indifferent actors, collected from all quarters and in no wise fit for a theatre.' At the end of the year they dispersed.⁷¹

Another company was touring in Northumberland in 1790, perhaps under the management of one of the Newcastle actors. On 6 March, Mr. Johnson's company presented the new play of *The Battle of Hexham* at the theatre in Hexham, with scenery which included 'a distant view of Hexham executed by Messrs. Stephenson of that town in a most masterly manner.'⁷²

As the century progressed the upper classes were not satisfied with the meagre amount of entertainment provided by the

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-13.

⁷⁰ Crawford-Hodgson, *North Country Diaries* (118 Surt. Soc. publ.), pp. 273, 275.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁷² *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Newc.*, 1 ser., vi, p. 110.

strollers, and amateur theatricals became exceedingly popular. Numerous plays must have been performed in the country houses of the north, but none was on so large a scale as those of the Delavals at Seaton Delaval. The stationer's bill of Francis Blake Delaval in 1737 is full of such items as 'binding a parcel of plays, 9*d.*,' 'for the Tragedy of King Charles 1, 1*s.*,' 'for Jane Grey, Henry VIII, The Indian Queen, 3 plays, 1*s.* 6*d.*,' and so forth.⁷³ Later he distinguished himself by playing Othello in an amateur performance at Drury Lane theatre in 1751. He was an intimate friend of Samuel Foote the actor, much to the indignation of his family, who imagined that Foote led Sir Francis astray. As a matter of fact, he does not seem to have needed much leading.⁷⁴

Sir Francis had a taste for the legitimate drama, and gave performances of *Othello* and *The Fair Penitent*, but this standard was not always maintained at Seaton Delaval. Robert Delaval at Christmas, 1753 entertained the neighbourhood to a pantomime there composed by himself. Rope-dancers, wire-walkers, conjurors, 'tilts, tournaments, gamblings, and bull-baitings,' were amongst the amusements of the family.⁷⁵ On one occasion, in March, 1792, the butler, Mr. Sibbit, was ordered to give two bottles of ale to 'The players that are now at the Pans,' who were perhaps local guisards. Eating and drinking seem to have been the most prominent features at the Seaton Delaval entertainments. There are two bills preserved, one for four plays given between Christmas and New Year, 1790, the other for one play in February, 1792. The amount of provisions and drink is extraordinary, but there is not a single entry which relates to the plays themselves; not even their names are recorded. The only allusion to their performance is the payment for the musicians and the cost of candles.⁷⁶ From other sources, however, it appears that two plays acted on 29 December, 1790,

⁷³ Robinson, *The Delaval Papers*, p. 85. ⁷⁴ *Arch. Ael.*, 2 ser., xv, p. 129.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, and Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92, 94.

were the inevitable *Fair Penitent*, and an after-piece called *You may like it or let it alone*, written for the occasion.⁷⁷

A rather unpleasant amateur performance took place at Alnwick, in February, 1786. The Rev. Percival Stockdale, who was in his day something of a celebrity, was vicar of Lesbury from 1784 to 1811. His matrimonial affairs had been unhappy, and he lived apart from his wife. 'After being settled at Lesbury, a hoax was played upon him; he was informed by letter that his wife had died, and that her remains had been sent to Alnmouth, by ship, for burial at Lesbury. Rejoicing at the news, he prepared for her funeral, and went aboard the vessel on its arrival; but to his horror he found a living instead of a dead wife. *The Dead Alive Again*, a farce on the subject, written by Thomas Collingwood, was printed and acted at Alnwick.'⁷⁸

Although these performances do not show a very high standard of taste, they indicate the increasing popularity of the theatre, and by degrees managers were found to profit by it. The second half of the eighteenth century was the period during which the stock companies were formed. They flourished for about a hundred years, and were killed in the middle of the nineteenth century, partly by the railways, partly by changes in the theatrical world of London. Macready described the old state of things in his *Reminiscences*:--

'At that time a theatre was considered indispensable in towns of very scanty populations. The prices of admission varied from 5s., 4s., or 3s. to boxes, 2s. 6d. or 2s. to pit, and 1s. to gallery. A sufficient number of theatres were united in what was called a circuit, to occupy a company during the whole year, so that a respectable player could calculate upon his weekly salary, without default, from year's end to year's end: and the circuits, such as those of Norwich, York, etc., with incomes rising from £70 to £300 per annum, would be a sort of home to him, so long as his conduct and industry maintained his favour with his audiences. But beyond that, the regularity of

⁷⁷ Sykes, *Local Records*, I, p. 357.

⁷⁸ *Proc. of Berwick Nat. Soc.* VII, 456; Crawford-Hodgson, *op. cit.*, 266-7n.

rehearsal and the attention paid to the production of plays, most of which came under the class of the "regular drama," made a sort of school for him in the repetition of his characters and the criticism of his auditors.^{78a}

It must have been in part due to this excellent training that there was such a large number of great actors in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The London stars did not then tour with all their scenery and effects. The celebrity came alone, and took the leading part in the play which was otherwise performed by the ordinary members of the company. This certainly cannot have been very satisfactory in most cases; in fact it was rendered possible only by the rhetorical style of acting then in vogue. There was no lime-light, but the effect of lime-light was produced when the leading actor took the centre of the stage, and no minor character was allowed to come within an arm's length of him unless the approach was absolutely essential to the plot. Sometimes, however, the performance of the celebrity was not so disastrous as might have been expected. When Mrs. Siddons visited Newcastle in 1789, George Frederick Cooke, then a young actor, attached to the Mosley Street theatre, acted with her,⁷⁹ and on a later occasion she acted there with young Macready.⁸⁰

A stock company required a permanent theatre for its headquarters, and by degrees theatres began for the first time to be built in the north. The first theatre in Newcastle was a sort of hybrid, being an annex to the Turk's Head Inn in the Bigg Market. It was opened in 1747 under the management of Messrs. Heaton and Austin, who were two of the principal actors.⁸¹ From a play-bill of 1773 it appears that the prices of seats were, boxes 2s. 6d., pit 2s., first gallery 1s., second gallery 6d. The performance began at half-past six. There was always a five act play, followed by a two act musical farce; often entertainments of

^{78a} Macready, *Reminiscences*, pp. 28-9, p. 270n.

⁷⁹ Dunlap, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 40.

⁸⁰ Macready, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁸¹ *Arch. Ael.*, 2 ser. iv, p. 237.



singing and dancing took place between the acts, while three pieces were sometimes given on the same evening. Patrons of the drama certainly had their money's worth in those days.⁸²

In 1768 a small theatre was opened at Stockton in connexion with the Green Dragon Inn.⁸³ On 10 July, 1771, a theatre was opened in Durham, but it appears to have been only a temporary building, as another was built there in 1792, funds being raised by subscription. The new theatre was opened on 12 March, when among the items on the programme was *Apollo's Holiday*, 'an occasional prelude' written by the manager, Mr. Cawdell.⁸⁴

The freemasons were great patrons of the drama at this time. They assisted at the founding of the Durham theatre; they bespoke a performance of *The Committee or The Faithful Irishman* at Newcastle as early as 1730;⁸⁵ and they attended in force at a grand opening of the Berwick theatre in 1794⁸⁶ and of the North Shields theatre in 1798.⁸⁷ The Theatre Royal, Sunderland, was opened in November, 1778,⁸⁸ and a theatre at South Shields was opened in 1791.⁸⁹ The Alnwick theatre was opened on 29 August, 1796, under the patronage of the duke and duchess of Northumberland. Like the Berwick theatre it was the work of Stephen Kemble, whose managerial successes will be mentioned presently. On 10 September the duke of Northumberland requested that *The English Merchant* and the farce of *The Children in the Wood* should be performed at the new Alnwick theatre.⁹⁰

The first manager to form a stock company in the north in rivalry to the Newcastle company was Thomas Bates, who seems to have been in but a small way of business. His company

⁸² *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Newc.*, 3rd ser., VIII, 90.

⁸³ Fordyce, *Hist. of Durham*, II, p. 176.

⁸⁴ Sykes, *Local Records*, I, p. 280; *Newcastle Advertiser*, 3 March, 1792.

⁸⁵ *Arch. Ael.*, 2 ser., IV, p. 237.

⁸⁶ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁸⁷ Sykes, *op. cit.*, I, p. 372, 386.

⁸⁸ Garbutt, *History of Sunderland*, p. 280.

⁸⁹ Sykes, *op. cit.*, I, p. 359.

⁹⁰ Crawford Hodgson, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

toured round the towns of Durham, its headquarters being Sunderland. It commonly visited Durham, Stockton, where there was a three months season, and occasionally Darlington, where it performed in June, 1772, at the New theatre, probably a temporary structure. The company was patronized by the Allans, who were then all-powerful in Darlington, and had a private theatre of their own at the Grange.⁹¹ Bates retired from the management of the company in 1790, but it was taken over by his nephew James Cawdell. It gives a good idea of the simplicity which then prevailed in theatrical affairs to read that 'Mr. Bates never aspired to make a figure as a performer; his most lucky character was that of clown in a pantomime. But . . . Mr. Cawdell, it will be remembered, was in an extensive variety of dramatic characters, an excellent performer.'⁹²

The most important theatrical event of this period was the building of the first Theatre Royal in Newcastle, the funds being raised by subscription. The matter was first proposed in December, 1784.⁹³ The royal licence was obtained in 1787, and the new theatre was opened in January, 1788.⁹⁴ The first managers were Austin and Whitelock, who had previously been the managers of the Turk's Head theatre. In 1789 Austin gave up his position to Munden, the comedian who was immortalised by Charles Lamb.⁹⁵ Munden, however, shone up on Newcastle only for three years. He went to Drury Lane, and his partner Whitelock, who had married one of John Kemble's sisters, emigrated to America, where he and his wife had considerable success.⁹⁶ In 1792 the Theatre Royal was taken over by a new manager, who became a most important person in the north. This was Stephen

⁹¹ Longstaffe, *Hist. of Darlington*, p. 300.

⁹² Garbutt, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

⁹³ *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Newc.*, 3rd ser., ix, p. 102.

⁹⁴ Brand, *op. cit.*, i, append.

⁹⁵ Mackenzie, *Hist. of Newc.*, ii, p. 593.

⁹⁶ Dunlap, *op. cit.*, p. 30; Fanny Kemble, *Records of a Girlhood*, i, p. 171.

Kemble, the younger brother of John Kemble and Mrs. Siddons. Although, like all the family, he had considerable dramatic talent, he could not compete in London with his more celebrated relations, but he became a very successful provincial actor and manager. He took over all the little theatres named above, Stockton, Durham, Sunderland, Berwick, and combined with them the management of the Newcastle and Edinburgh theatres. His niece, Fanny Kemble, gives a pleasant picture of life in the old stock company, in her account of her aunt Adelaide de Camp—

Mr. Stephen Kemble . . . lived for many years at Durham, and was the manager of the theatre there, and according to the fashion of that time, travelled with his company, at stated intervals, to Newcastle, Sunderland, and other places, which formed a sort of theatrical circuit in the northern counties, throughout which he was well known and generally respected. In his company my aunt . . . found employment, and in his daughter Fanny Kemble, since well known as Mrs. Robert Arkwright, an inseparable friend and companion. My aunt lived with Mr. and Mrs. Kemble, who were excellent, worthy people. They took good care of the two young girls under their charge, this linsey-woolsey Rosalind and Celia, their own beautiful and most rarely endowed daughter, and her light-hearted, lively companion, and I suppose that a merrier life than that of these lasses in the midst of their quaint theatrical tasks and homely household duties was seldom led by two girls in any sphere of life. They learned and acted their parts, devised and executed, with small means and great industry, their dresses; made pies and puddings, and patched and darned, in the morning, and by dint of paste and rouge became heroines in the evening; and withal were well conducted, good young things, full of the irrepressible spirits of their age, and turning alike their hard home work, and light stage labour into fun. . . . Liston, the famous comedian, was at this time a member of the Durham company, and though he began his career there by reciting Collins' "Ode to the Passions," attired in a pea-green coat, buckskins, top boots, and powder, with a scroll in his hand, and followed up this essay of his powers with the tragic actor's battle-horse, the part of Hamlet, he soon found his peculiar gift to lie in the diametrically opposite direction of broad farce."⁹⁷

The most striking fact recorded about Stephen Kemble is that in his old age he became so stout that he could play Falstaff without padding. He was a highly successful manager,

⁹⁷ Fanny Kemble, *Records of a Girlhood*, I, pp. 31-3.

and was able to retire in 1805 with a comfortable fortune. He purchased a house called the Grove at the end of Silver Street, Durham, wrote 'esquire' after his name, and, when he died in 1822, was buried in the chapel of the Nine Altars in the cathedral.⁹⁸

After Stephen Kemble's retirement the northern circuit fell apart. His treasurer, Anderson, and one of his actors, Faulkner, took over the Sunderland, Durham and other minor theatres,⁹⁹ but the Theatre Royal, Newcastle, passed to William Macready, the father of the famous actor, William Charles Macready. The new manager was not such a successful man of business as his predecessor, and soon fell into difficulties. Perhaps his intense obstinacy had something to do with his failure. His son gives a curious instance of this feature of his character when at Berwick in 1814 he insisted on giving a performance on the night of the illuminations for the Peace, although there were only three persons in the theatre at the beginning of the play, and none at the end.¹⁰⁰

Long before this the elder Macready had become involved in debt. His son had been intended for the law, but in 1809, when he was only sixteen, he left Rugby to undertake the management of the theatre at Newcastle for the summer season, while his father was engaged in bankruptcy proceedings at Birmingham. In 1810 young Macready made his first appearance on the stage at Birmingham, and later in the year he came to Newcastle, where the whole family lived for some years.¹⁰¹ The great feature of this management was the production of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, at Newcastle in 1812. It was the first time that the play had been performed since Shakespeare's own time; the performance was a great success.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Fordyce, *Hist. of Durham*, I, p. 218n.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 341; Garbutt, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

¹⁰⁰ Macready, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

The elder Macready left Newcastle in 1818, and the next manager was De Camp, whose tenancy was marked by a disastrous panic, caused by a very slight fire, in 1823.¹⁰³ Nicholson followed De Camp in 1824, and was the first man to free the theatre from debt. His successor in 1832 was W. S. Penley.¹⁰⁴

At this time Newcastle produced a local dramatist, Thomas Doubleday, who published four historical tragedies between 1823 and 1836.¹⁰⁵ One of these, *Babington, a Tragedy*, was printed in 1825, and was produced by Penley at the Theatre Royal in 1833. J. R. Anderson, one of the actors at the first performance, wrote an account of it long afterwards in his reminiscences called 'Seven Decades of an Actor's Life,' published in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* in 1887. These are, like most theatrical reminiscences, silly, ill-written and vulgar, but rather amusing in the unconscious self-revelation. About Doubleday's play he says:—

'Mr. Sam Penley had accepted a new and original tragedy called *Babington's Conspiracy*, an historical play by a gentleman of Newcastle named Doubleday—the late Mr. Thomas Doubleday. The play possessed considerable merit—written in smooth blank verse containing pathos and passion—but was faulty in its construction. It was what we call a one-part play, and that was Babington. Mr. Cathcart was our leading man this season, and he played the hero. He was a good actor in a general way, had power and passion, but wild and uncertain . . . I had an idea that Babington, being a lover, ought to have fallen to me; but I had good reason to be thankful that it did not. The cast was very full, and I could not be left out, but I was allowed the privilege of selecting what part I chose after Babington. I read the MS. very carefully and chose a small but effective part, and, to my thinking, the best-drawn character in the play. I was not mistaken, for it turned up trumps. The character was a middle-aged Jesuit priest, a bosom friend of the hero, and an agent in the conspiracy against Queen Elizabeth. Whilst studying the part, I grew fond of it, as step by step I found the way to work out effects which ultimately won me a triumph. At the rehearsals, you may be assured, I did not show all I intended to do at night, but just enough to prove that I was

¹⁰³ Contemporary Accounts are preserved at the Newcastle Free Library.

¹⁰⁴ Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, II, p. 592.

¹⁰⁵ Welford, *Men of Mark*, II, p. 112.

not displeased with the part, and that I meant to do my best with it. On the first night, the house was filled with the best people of the town and country. When I made my appearance on the stage, which was not till after several scenes had passed, I was received with cold indifference. The audience did not know me, I was so disguised. The actors were somewhat surprised, my reception being usually cordial. I knew the cause in a moment, for from the background, where I had modestly placed myself, I could see them scanning the playbills to find out who I was. The dress, make-up, and quiet cat-like walk I assumed completely deceived them. It was not until I crept slowly to the front and began to speak that I was recognised. Then, at once, I was received with all my former honours.'

It was during W. S. Penley's management that, in consequence of the building of Grey Street in 1837, the old theatre in Mosley Street was pulled down, and the present Theatre Royal was opened in Grey Street. It was rather a disastrous period for the drama. The puritan hostility had weakened, but it was replaced by the niminy-piminy ideas of the early Victorian age. It is melancholy to see how those two great actors, Fanny Kemble and William Charles Macready, were haunted by the feeling that their profession was a degradation. Instead of putting forth their powers freely and joyfully, they were hampered by the notion that it was unladylike or unmanly to act. These ideas reacted unfavourably upon the drama. The great actors of the preceding period were dead. The great dramatists were dead. Changes in finance and in the conditions of life weakened the stock company system, until it fell into that decay so admirably satirised by Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby* and by Thackeray in *Pendennis*. The new Theatre Royal was opened during the darkness which preceded the dawn of a new dramatic era.