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RITUAL, DRAMA AND SOCIAL BODY IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH TOWN

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RITUAL, DRAMA AND SOCIAL BODY IN THE LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH TOWN*

THIS ARTICLE AIMS TO DISCUSS A SPECIFIC LATE MEDIEVAL CULT AS practised in a specific context: that of the late medieval town. The kind of town to be considered falls typically into the category of "provincial capital", or at least of "county town", in terms of a recently suggested classification.¹ The cult in question is the cult of Corpus Christi. Corpus Christi was celebrated annually on a day which fell sometime between the end of May and the end of June.² What I propose to discuss are the various rites which were celebrated on Corpus Christi Day, the various dramatic, theatrical manifestations which took place in connection with the occasion, and the mythology associated with both. By and large Corpus Christi has received more attention from literary scholars than from historians. This is because the famous Corpus Christi play cycles developed in connection with the Corpus Christi cult. The mythology of Corpus Christi has been very interestingly discussed by, for example, V. A. Kolve and Jerome Taylor.³ Much has been written about the ways the plays were presented and produced, some of this by scholars with a strong historical sense, as more recently Alan Nelson and Margaret Dorrell.⁴ Nevertheless, there does seem to be lacking among most of these writers anything more than a very generalized idea⁵ of the late

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¹ See P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition, 1500-1700: Essays in Urban History* (London, 1976), pp. 8 ff.

² The date of Corpus Christi Day was determined by that of Easter Sunday and showed the same variation from year to year.

³ V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London, 1966); Jerome Taylor, "The Dramatic Structure of the Corpus Christi Play", in Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (eds.), *Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual* (Chicago, 1972), pp. 148 ff.

⁴ Alan H. Nelson, *The Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays* (Chicago, 1974); Margaret Dorrell, "The Mayor of York and the Coronation Pageant", *Leeds Studies in English*, new ser., v (1971), pp. 34-45; Margaret Dorrell and Alexandra F. Johnston, "The Domesday Pageant of the York Mercers", *Leeds Studies in English*, new ser., v (1971), pp. 29-34.

⁵ As expressed for example by Taylor, "Dramatic Structure of the Corpus Christi Play", pp. 152-3.

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