

Some notes on Processions in English History

“Next came another band of musicians, with 50 men and naked boys dyed black like devils, with darts and targets in their hands, goading the followers of Pluto, who was on a pulpit under a canopy seated on a serpent that spat fire: he himself being naked, with drawn sword in his hand so contrived that, when he brandished it, it made the serpent vomit very fetid sulphuric fire-balls: and on the pulpit in front of Pluto were figure of an ox and some serpents”

Account of part of the 1521 Midsummer Watch by the Venetian ambassador Spinetti

“Two disguised called green men, their habit embroidered and stitched with ivie-leaves... hanging to their shoulders, black shaggy hayre, bearing Herclian clubs in their hands; an artificial dragon, very lively to behold, pursuing the savages... casting fire from his mouth which afterwards was slain, to the great pleasure of the spectators”

Description of Chester pageant, 'Triumph in honour of her Prince' by Robert Amie.

The English processional tradition was at its peak in the late medieval and Tudor period. Whit Monday was a notable day for processions, with images of the virgin and apostles, minstrels, banners, garlands. Processions both in and out of church were an important Medieval and early renaissance church ritual. Such processional forms can still be found in Catholic countries like Spain and Italy.

The traditional had many roots including various guising traditions and church celebrations, like the 'Feast of Fools' with;

“Their hobby horse, dragons and other antiques, together with their buadic pipers and thundering drummers”

Guild Processions

The guilds played an important part in processions, creating mythic pageants and images. Late medieval Guild pageants in Chester and Norwich featured; 'Paradise' mounted on cart, 'the holy ghost', an ark and a view of Hell, plus spoken drama, on Tuesday Norwich appointed a 'Lord of Misrule'.

London Guild pageants in c14 included a 'Castle of War', St George and 'Pluto' with a serpent that spat fireballs, plus a giant figure', Lord Marlinspikes' and 'King of the Moors' accompanied by 'wild fire', children dressed as angels with peacock feather wings.

Chester 1564- four giants, a unicorn, an ass, a lynx, a dragon, six hobby horses and sixteen naked boys(dyed black to represent devils).

Coventry parade accompanied with pales filled with resin soaked rope to burn.

Midsummer Watch

The 'Midsummer Watch featured processions for the feast of the nativity of St John the Baptist (23rd June) and Saints Peter and Paul (28th June). Stow in his *Survey of London*, 1603 records that watches were inaugurated by Henry 111 in 1253 because of a rise in violence and robbery through the night. The watch would stand guard or perambulate a specific area. In 1377 *“a watch and ward was kept on the eves of the nativity of St John. Baptist and the feast of St Peter and St Paul, and for precautions to be taken against fire”* (burning bonfires was a midsummer festivity). The marching watch was transformed from a troop of constables parading the town to a more splendid procession:

"Then had ye besides the standing watches all in bright harness, in every ward and street of the city and suburbs... The marching watch contained in number about two thousand men... captains, lieutenants, serjeants, corporals... wiflers, drummers, and fifes, standard and ensign bearers"

These early watches were "primarily a military spectacle" organized by the livery companies:

"Hundreds of the participants had loaded guns, as well as stores of black powder, shoulder to shoulder with spluttering and flaming cresset lights"

John Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing*

The London processional Morris was martial and exotic"

John Forrest, *The history of Morris Dancing*

It could itself be an instrument of disorder, never the less it is clear that:

"Civic processions and perambulations were a fundamental component of daily law and order in sixteenth-century England... In some cases lawbreakers were processed around the streets so they might be identified and avoided" J. Forrest. (Morris dancing important part of processions from 1520 to 1580).

Morris dancing and pageants became an important part of processions from 1520 to 1580. The Morris dancers were armed with swords and bucklers "The European processional morescas may well be descendants of the widespread medieval dance/drama Moro y Cristianos... Supposedly the first Moros y Cristianos was performed in Lerida in 1149 as part of the celebration of the betrothal of Petronilla, queen of Aragon to Ramon of Barcelona, the dance drama was apparently invented a recent defeat of the Moors. Two forms derive from this, processional dance and courtly dance, both sharing elements of choreographed conflict. 'The London Midsummer Watches borrowed such exotic customs from European processions... In 1521, the Drapers company included in their train a King of Moors and followers... the Moors were provided with darts but they also carried 'wildfire' (an incendiary chemical mixture used primarily in siegecraft but also employable as a firework when held at the end of a staff) which they let off 'after they had put off their clothes'. They probably wore body suits as described by accounts for a masque of Young Moors at court in 1548 (Feuillerat 1914, 30-1). Another account of the 1521 watch by the Venetian Ambassador Spinelli

"Next came another band of musicians, with 50 men and naked boys dyed black like devils, with dart and target in their hands, goading the followers of Pluto, who was on a pulpit under a canopy seated on a serpent that spat fire: he himself being naked, with drawn sword in his hand so contrived that, when he brandished it, it made the serpent vomit very fetid sulphuric fire-balls: and on the pulpit in front of Pluto were figure of an ox, a lion and some serpents"

The Coventry parade accompanied with pales filled with resin soaked rope to burn.

"A procession is a special form of dramatic spectacle because it is made of units strung out linearly that parade past a static audience... Great emphasis music, therefore, be placed on displays that can be taken in all at once" John Forrest, *The history of Morris Dancing*

The procession becomes increasingly 'mythic' with St George and 'Pluto' with serpent that spat fireballs, plus giant figure', Lord Marlinspikes' and 'King of the Moors' accompanied by 'wild fire', children dressed as angels with peacock feather wings. At Chester in 1564 there are recorded four giants, a unicorn, an ass, a lynx, a dragon six hobby horses and sixteen naked boys(dyed black to represent devils). Hobby horses are recorded by Montgomery in 1585.

"ITEM, 12 proper boyes, on hobby horses finely covered with some prettye coloured thinge... which saud boyes to have everie one little sword... that after praunsing, mountinge and fetchinge up their horses alofte... they maie at divers tymes in the watch make combat all together... all 12 to fighte at one instant, to saie 6 against 6, in true form and order of a matachina"



THE GREEN MAN IN ENGLISH PROCESSIONS

The green man was a regular feature of c16 and C17th pageants and entertainment's, especially associated with Lord Mayors Pageant. They often functioned as 'whifflers', clearing way through crowds with fireworks and flaming torches.

" in front of all before these , twenty savages or Green men with Squibs and fire-works, to sweep the streets and keep off the crowd"- Matthew Taubman 1686

*"Comes the pageant by, I'll stand out of the way of the green man's way for burning my vestment"- Robert Wilson **The Cobblers Tragedy** 1594*

"Two disguised called green men, their habit embroidered and stitched with ivie-leaves with blackside, having hanging to their shoulders, a huge black shaggy hayre, bearing Herclian clubbes in their hands, an artificial dragon, very lively to behold, pursuing the savages entering their den, casting fire from his mouth which afterwards was slain, to the great pleasure of the spectators, bleeding panting, fainting and staggering."
description of Chester's pageant ', Triumph in honour of Her Prince' by Robert Amie

Also used as a sign for pubs especially with a still

" They are called woud men, or wildmen, thou at these day we in ye sign (trade) call them green men, couered with grene boues: and are used fir signes by stiflers of strong waters"

Wild men were a sub group of whifflers covered in hair. Both figures play strong roles in late medieval and renaissance iconography. And the green man of pageant and pub has been directly related to the famous 'green man ' or foliate head of church iconography. Although the development of the church foliate head is the subject of considerable

controversy.

the green man seems to occupy a highly ambivalent space. Some relate the church heads to symbols of lust and primal unredeemed man; however the green man becomes more sophisticated, the wild man serving as a symbol for primal urges, the green man taking on elements of Bacchus, an embodiment of "disciplined erotic passion".



Processional Giants

Processional giants were very popular in England, Spain, and Flanders,

Although there are countless examples of giant processional saints and Madonnas, Spain now boasts of only one survival, at Barcelona, while in that part of modern Belgium and France which was once Flanders almost every city has its communal giants, -colossal effigies which with their colossal consorts or attendants are carried about the streets on

certain days. Sometimes they are formed of osier, as at

Douai, sometimes carved elaborately in wood, as at Antwerp. But all are so constructed that their lower robes hang around their feet so as to conceal the men carrying the figure and making it move appropriately

The procession of giants in Barcelona occurs on Corpus Christi Day.

A dozen enormously tall figures, representing scriptural and legendary men and women, -the Cid, Santiago, etc., - dressed in ancient costumes, promenade the streets.

Around these giants dance dozens of bronze-faced men in female garb, and behind them march troops of children arrayed as angels. The child at the head of the angelic host is usually the son or the daughter of one of the richest merchants of the city; the dainty little body has wings made of tulle fastened upon card-board. Sometimes a bevy of children ranged around some sweet-faced woman represent angels grouped around the Madonna. Then follow long rows of pupils of religious societies, the officials of the city, carrying wax tapers in their hands; and finally,

escorted by military bands and surrounded by priests and soldiers, the throne of one of the earliest of canonized Catalonian kings, -a golden chair richly chased, encrusted with jewels and heaped with flowers.

London has its Gog and Magog, whose representations still stand in the old Guildhall of London. These are taken down to form part of the Lord Mayor's show. Formerly they figured with other giants and with monstrous dragons in

the popular processions on Midsummer Eve, May-day, and Shrovetide. The original images were made of wicker and pasteboard, so that they were easy to move; but the London fire destroyed one set, the rats

subsequently ate up the entrails of another, and the modern ones are wooden counterparts. The Puritans under Cromwell succeeded in breaking up the processions of giants, and, though they had a temporary revival under Charles II, they finally languished and died.

Among the relics of this ancient pastime is the Tailors' Giant

still preserved at Salisbury, -the last of the old English perambulating giants. A pasteboard head crowned with tow hair is fitted on a framework of lath and hoops. A person could walk inside and carry the figure, being himself completely concealed by the drapery of colored chintz, bordered with red and purple and trimmed with yellow fringe. A gold-laced cocked hat was placed on the head, a pipe in the mouth, and a branch of artificial laurel in the right hand.

At Norwich a dragon survived in the mayoralty processions until so late as 1832. It was composed of canvas, stretched over a framework of wood. The outside was painted of a sea-green color, with gilt scales and a crimson mane tied in fantastic knots about the tail. The body was five feet in length, but the neck and head could be elongated three feet and a half, and could also be turned in any direction at the will of the bearer.

When Queen Elizabeth visited Kenilworth Castle, in 1575, there were six gigantic figures, eight feet in height, standing guard over the castle gate. *"By this dumb show,"* explains a contemporary writer, *"it was meant that in the days of King Arthur men were of that stature, so that the Castle of Kenilworth should still seem to be kept by King Arthur's heirs and their servants."*

Curiosities of Popular Customs And of Rites, Ceremonies, Observances, and Miscellaneous Antiquities

By William S. Walsh

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