Urban politics and material culture at the end of the Middle Ages: the Coventry tapestry in St Mary's Hall

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ABSTRACT: This article uses the evidence of the internal decoration and spatial hierarchy of an English town hall to explore the construction of urban oligarchy in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Urban historians have regarded this period as one of fundamental importance in the political history of pre-modern English towns. It is associated with the emergence of the 'close corporation', an oligarchic form of government which remained largely in place until the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. The article examines the iconography and historical context of a tapestry, custom-made for the town hall of Coventry around 1500, to present a different view of the character of urban political culture at the end of the Middle Ages.

The iconography and architecture of medieval town halls have attracted an increasing amount of interest in recent years from those studying towns in the Low Countries and Germany. Historians have explored the politics of construction and decoration, specifically the extent to which the artistic embellishment of these urban structures reflected political relations within and without the city and, more ambitiously, conveyed political messages in its own right. To Éloddie Lecuppre-Desjardin, seeking to challenge the accepted view of a straightforward conflict between a centralizing Burgundian state and the local forces of urban particularism, it is significant that it was far from unusual to find a gallery of portraits of the counts of Flanders on the façades of town halls, even in the rebellious city of Ghent. At Ypres, in 1450, the roof of the council chamber was adorned with the arms of the duke and duchess of Burgundy, together with those of the

county of Flanders and the town.[1] Historical work on German town halls is more extensive.[2] The town hall was not only a place of interaction and exchange, but a medium of communication, whose multiple programmes of images have been located within their immediate historical context, as the product of specific political situations and problems confronting a town's rulers.[3] It is striking how little has been written on medieval English town halls. London's Guildhall has been fortunate in that it has been the subject of two separate architectural and archaeological histories, which serve as excellent works of reference, but are geared more towards reconstruction than interpretation.[4] Caroline Barron's discussion of the meaning and significance of the monumental figures chosen to decorate the exterior of London's new Guildhall in the 1430s only occupies a few pages in a wider account of the public projection of oligarchic authority and the circulation of political ideas within the city.[5] Nothing can compete with Robert Tittler's book-length study of the relationship between the town hall and the urban community, which covers the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Tittler's conviction that the hall, as the centre of civic government, 'seemed likely to show how a particular building type could represent such intangible concepts as power, authority, and legitimacy within the community', is very much the inspiration for what follows here.[6]

In the late Middle Ages, Coventry's town hall occupied the building, situated in the centre of the walled city, known as St Mary's Hall. The recent, and very welcome, publication of studies of the stained glass

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[1] É. Lecuppre-Desjardin, 'Des pouvoirs inscrits dans la pierre? Essai sur l'édilité urbaine dans les anciens Pays-Bas bourguignons au XVe siècle', *Memini. Travaux et documents publiés par la Société des études médiévales du Québec*, 7 (2003), 33. On the didactic use of writing on town halls in the Low Countries, see C. Billen, 'Dire le bien commun dans l'espace public. Matérialité épigraphique et monumentale du bien commun dans les villes des Pays-Bas, à la fin du Moyen Âge', in É. Lecuppre-Desjardin and A.-L. Van Bruaene (eds.), *De bono communi. The Discourse and Practice of the Common Good in the European City (13th–16th c.)* (Turnhout, 2010), 71–8.

[2] Notable studies in German include: U. Surmann, 'Vom städtischen Umgang mit Bildern. Die Bildprogramme des Kölner Rathauses', in H. Kier *et al.* (eds.), *Köln: Der Ratsturm. Seine Geschichte und sein Figurenprogramm* (Cologne, 1996), 166–201; U. Meier, 'Vom Mythos der Republik. Formen und Funktionen spätmittelalterlicher Rathausikonographie in Deutschland und Italien', in A. Löther *et al.* (eds.), *Mundus in imagine. Bildersprache und Lebenswelten im Mittelalter* (Munich, 1996), 345–87. The most recent study in English is L. Scales, 'The illuminated Reich: memory, crisis, and the visibility of monarchy in late medieval Germany', in J.P. Coy *et al.* (eds.), *The Holy Roman Empire, Reconsidered* (Oxford, 2010), 73–92.

[3] S. Rau and G. Schwerhoff, 'Öffentliche Räume in der Frühen Neuzeit', in *idem* (eds.), *Zwischen Gotteshaus und Taverne: Öffentliche Räume in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Cologne, 2004), 44.

[4] C.M. Barron, *The Medieval Guildhall of London* (London, 1974); David Bowsher *et al.*, *The London Guildhall: An Archaeological History of a Neighbourhood from Early Medieval to Modern Times*, 2 vols. (London, 2007).

[5] C.M. Barron, 'The political culture of medieval London', in L. Clark and C. Carpenter (eds.), *Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain* (Woodbridge, 2004), 112–13, 119–22.

[6] R. Tittler, *Architecture and Power: The Town Hall and the English Urban Community c. 1500–1640* (Oxford, 1991), 4.

and the architectural development of St Mary's Hall in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, both arising from a British Archaeological Association conference on medieval Coventry,[7] should not distract from the fundamental point that the role of buildings and other material objects as markers of power and authority in late medieval English towns is long overdue for analysis. The wonderful tapestry, measuring 10 feet high and 30 feet wide, which still hangs in the hall, has never received a detailed, modern examination (Figure 1).[8] This is all the more surprising given that the tapestry dates from around 1500, probably the first decade of the sixteenth century. This was precisely the period when Coventry was in the midst of serious economic decline and the city's corporate finances were in a seemingly precipitous state.[9] Although there is no extant documentation recording the cost of the tapestry, circumstantial evidence indicates, as we shall see, that it represented a major financial investment. Its donors manifestly regarded it as important, and so should we. What was the connection between the commissioning of the work of art and the contemporary historical context?

Several scholars, drawing upon unsubstantiated antiquarian work, have tentatively proposed an association between the tapestry and a visit by Henry VII to Coventry around 1500, when the king and his wife, Elizabeth of York, are reputed to have been admitted to the Holy Trinity guild, a prestigious fraternity, whose meetings and feasts were held in St Mary's Hall. There are, however, serious problems with this linkage. For a start, there is uncertainty over the precise date of the visit. Joan C. Lancaster, the renowned historian of medieval Coventry, believed that the tapestry was commissioned for the visit of Henry and Elizabeth in 1500.[10] Mary Dormer Harris agreed that it was in 1500 that the king and queen 'became a brother and sister of the Trinity fraternity'.[11] W.G. Fretton, the Coventry antiquary, thought that it was in 1499 that Henry and Elizabeth were admitted.[12] In

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[7] A. Rudebeck, 'John Thornton and the stained glass of St Mary's Guildhall, Coventry', *Journal of Stained Glass*, 31 (2007), 14–34; G. Demidowicz, 'The development of St Mary's Hall, Coventry: a short history', in L. Monckton and R.K. Morris (eds.), *Coventry: Medieval Art, Architecture and Archaeology in the City and its Vicinity* (British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions, 33, 2011), 164–81. I would like to thank Richard Morris for supplying the details of Demidowicz's essay prior to publication.

[8] See the comment of S. McKendrick, 'Tapestries from the Low Countries in England during the fifteenth century', in C.M. Barron and N. Saul (eds.), *England and the Low Countries in the Late Middle Ages* (Stroud, 1995), 44. There are two short articles on the tapestry: G. Scharf, 'The old tapestry in St Mary's Hall at Coventry', *Archaeologia*, 36 (1855), 438–53, and A.F. Kendrick, 'The Coventry tapestry', *Burlington Magazine*, 44 (Feb. 1924), 83–5, 88–9.

[9] C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City. Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979), 35–9, 44–5. For a recent analysis, see R. Goddard, *Commercial Contraction and Urban Decline in Fifteenth-Century Coventry* (Dugdale Society Occasional Papers, 46, 2006).

[10] J.C. Lancaster, *St Mary's Hall, Coventry: A Guide to the Building, its History and Contents* (Coventry, 1981), 42.

[11] M.D. Harris, *The Story of Coventry* (London, 1911), 158.

[12] W.G. Fretton, 'Memorials of St. Mary's Hall, Coventry', 21, best accessed in Coventry Record Office (CRO), PA 2337/4/10.

Figure 1: Tapestry in the Great Hall (St Mary's Hall, Coventry)

fact, it is now known, from a modern, but unpublished reconstruction of Henry VII's itinerary, that the king was in Coventry between 28 and 31 January 1501.[13] Exactly what he did in Coventry during his royal progress is not known. There is nothing further from the king's side beyond the bare chronology of his sojourn, and the *Coventry Leet Book*, the main civic register, is wholly silent about Henry VII's stay. This is puzzling, since the clerks responsible for the production and maintenance of the minutes of the meetings of the town council did record earlier royal visits, such as those made by Henry VI and his wife in the 1450s, in considerable detail.[14] The assertion that the Holy Trinity fraternity admitted Henry VII during his residence in the city is repeated endlessly in the secondary sources, but without attribution or demonstrable proof.[15] We might expect the fraternity to have admitted Henry to confraternity, as it had his royal predecessors, the three Lancastrian kings, Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI, but there is no way of knowing conclusively because of the destruction of one of the fraternity's registers during a fire at Birmingham Reference Library in 1879.[16] It is, however, suggestive that neither William Dugdale, the Warwickshire antiquary of the seventeenth century, nor Thomas Sharp, the nineteenth-century antiquary, both of whom had access to the records of the fraternity before they were burned, mentioned Henry VII's status as a brother of the guild.[17] A simple correlation between fraternal membership and artistic patronage does not explain the commissioning of the tapestry.

When the tapestry was removed for cleaning and repair in the late 1970s, John Nevinson, then Curator of Textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), reported that the tapestry was 'not merely rare but unique'.[18] Its distinction lay not in the high quality of the weave – it was woven with relatively coarse wool warps and interwoven with dyed silk weft, without gold or silver highlights – but in its composition. Tapestries were designed on the basis of a cartoon, and many of these cartoons were 're-used' to create multiple sets of tapestry derived from the same design, with the result that 'similar or identical pieces can now be found in various royal and state collections throughout Europe'.[19] The Coventry tapestry, in Nevinson's words, 'is to be found nowhere else'. It spoke to a Coventry

[13] I owe this information to Miss Margaret Condon, formerly of the Public Record Office.

[14] *The Coventry Leet Book*, ed. M.D. Harris (Early English Text Society, original ser. 134–46, 1907–13), 262–6, 285–92, 297–301.

[15] Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 140; Harris, *Story of Coventry*, 158; Lancaster, *St Mary's Hall*, 42; R.K. Morris, 'St Mary's Hall and the medieval architecture of Coventry', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, n.s. 32 (1988), 10.

[16] *The Register of the Guild of the Holy Trinity, St. Mary, St. John the Baptist and St. Katherine of Coventry*, ed. M.D. Harris (Dugdale Society, 13, 1935), ix n. 2.

[17] W. Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire* (London, 1656), 123; 'Supplementary list of guild brethren from the Sharp MS', in *Register of the Guild of the Holy Trinity*, ed. Harris, 101–12.

[18] The Textile Conservation Centre (TCC) report is no. 0154. There is a copy in CRO, 1694/12/1. Frances Lennard of the Textile Conservation Centre, now at the University of Glasgow, kindly gave me access to Nevinson's additional report.

[19] J. Nevinson, 'Report on the tapestry in St Mary's Hall, Coventry'.

audience, and it is therefore vital to ask what it may have meant within the city.

This one object – a medieval tapestry in St Mary's Hall, Coventry – can in fact reveal much about the character of urban political culture at the end of the Middle Ages, a topic of no little importance in the history of English towns. In the 1970s, Peter Clark and Paul Slack produced a seminal essay on the 'narrowing of the political framework of urban society' in the early modern period and felt confident enough to assert that the 'continuous growth of oligarchic magistracy' was 'the most obvious theme in English urban history from 1500 to 1700'.[20] According to Clark and Slack, the crown was the driving force behind this trend towards oligarchy, which was characterized by the closing down of spaces for political debate and the widening of the division between rulers and ruled within the early modern town. This thesis has recently been restated and applied specifically to the reign of the first Tudor king. According to James Lee, Henry VII should occupy a central place in the narrative of the triumph of oligarchy, since he pursued a deliberate and sustained policy to endorse and promote oligarchic models of urban governance. He took a special interest in the constitutional arrangements of English cities, and granted them particular kinds of royal charter which aimed both to reduce the role of ordinary citizens in political life and, simultaneously, to enhance the magisterial authority of urban rulers over their subjects. Urban government in this analysis, then, was exclusive rather than participatory. The small minority of senior office holders was increasingly set apart from the 'broader urban community' in political, social and economic terms. Instead of election to high office, there was co-option, self-selection and the birth of the 'closed' corporation.[21] At the same time, in cities such as Coventry and London, according to Shannon McSheffrey, the second half of the fifteenth century saw the 'creation' of a particular urban and magisterial 'style of Catholicism', which 'we might term "civic Catholicism"' and which 'allowed civic elites to conceive of their duties to maintain peace and order in their communities in religious terms'.[22] McSheffrey identified the emergence of a religiously inflected political discourse, which equated disorder with sin and which helped to extend the social reach of urban oligarchy by enabling civic magistrates to scrutinize and punish offences arising from the marital and sexual lives of urban inhabitants. The quality of magisterial rule was intrusive, patriarchal and, most of all, assertive and assured. The willingness 'to use explicitly religious rhetoric' in civic ordinances and secular courts was evidence of the 'self-confidence' of urban elites, who did not hesitate to exercise what they regarded as 'their

[20] P. Clark and P. Slack, 'Introduction', in *idem* (eds.), *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500– 1700* (London, 1972), 20, 25.

[21] J. Lee, 'Urban policy and urban political culture: Henry VII and his towns', *Historical Research*, 82 (2009), 493–510, esp. 506–7.

[22] S. McSheffrey, 'Jurors, respectable masculinity, and Christian morality: a comment on Marjorie McIntosh's *Controlling Misbehavior*', *Journal of British Studies*, 37 (1998), 276–7.

religious and moral responsibilities as civic leaders'.[23] English cities at the end of the Middle Ages thus appear to be characterized by a particular kind of civic political culture: oligarchic, polarized, hierarchical.

On first inspection, the Coventry tapestry does little to refute such a conclusion. It combines royal and religious imagery to locate the civic magistrates of Coventry within a larger hierarchical political structure connecting the city's governors to monarchy and, ultimately, to God. However, the spatial and historical context of the tapestry presents a more complex picture of the construction of oligarchy. It remains critical to ask how civic rulers sought to define their *own* authority. The deployment of imagery of royal power and Christian ideology, it will be argued here, was in fact born of a feeling of vulnerability on the part of an embattled urban elite. This defensive mentality was shared in the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries by the governors of other major English towns and cities, none of whom would have felt certain that oligarchy had emerged 'victorious' as the dominant force within urban politics.[24] The local political world within which urban elites operated was considerably more febrile, and their authority more contested, than the concept of the growth and triumph of oligarchy suggests.

St Mary's Hall

The architectural complex, which constitutes St Mary's Hall and which can be seen today, is a rebuilding of the original site and is largely the product of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Figure 2).[25] One version of the Coventry annals – a form of civic chronicle structured around the mayoral year of office which began in the second half of the fifteenth century and which continued until the eighteenth century – states that St Mary's Hall was constructed between the mid-1390s and the mid-1410s.[26] Roof bosses in the great hall include representations of the heraldic device of the white hart, the symbol most closely associated with Richard II, king of England between 1377 and 1399.[27] The visual acknowledgement of Richard II's kingship was almost certainly a reference to the king's role in the history of the fraternity for which St Mary's Hall was a meeting place for communal feasts and other forms of guild activity. The original

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[23] *Ibid.*, 277. For the link to urban oligarchy, see S. McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia, 2006), 8.

[24] On oligarchy's ultimate 'triumph', see S. Rigby, 'Urban "oligarchy" in late medieval England', in J.A.F. Thomson (ed.), *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1988), 77, and S.H. Rigby and E. Ewan, 'Government, power and authority 1300–1540', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. I: *600–1540* (Cambridge, 2000), 309–12.

[25] Demidowicz, 'Development of St Mary's Hall, Coventry', 164–81.

[26] BL Harleian MS 6388, pp. 13, 15.

[27] Morris, 'St Mary's Hall', 23–4; D. Biggs, 'The Trinity gild of Coventry, and the royal affinity, 1392–1413', *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association*, 16–17 (1995–96), 102.

Figure 2: St Mary's Hall, Coventry (exterior)

building complex dated from the 1340s, when the fraternity dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary used the space. In the second half of the fourteenth century, this fraternity merged informally with other local foundations: the guild of St John the Baptist, the guild of St Katherine and, finally, the Holy Trinity guild.[28] In 1392, letters patent of Richard II gave formal recognition to the recently amalgamated fraternity.[29]

From its rebuilding in the 1390s, however, St Mary's Hall was much more than a guildhall, where a religious fraternity feasted and convened its meetings. It was a civic structure – a town hall – where the business relating to the urban community of Coventry was transacted. The great hall, for example, was the meeting place of the court leet, originally a civic court, but increasingly a legislative body for the whole city. It was also where the electoral jury, whose members annually chose Coventry's civic officials, assembled.[30] The fraternity and the civic government shared the same space. This is best indicated by the evidence of an inventory of the

28 *Register of the Guild of the Holy Trinity*, ed. Harris, xiii–xiv.
29 *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1391–96, 131.
30 Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 162.

possessions of the guild from 1441, which listed the fraternity's goods in each room within St Mary's Hall. In the treasury, at the south end of the great hall, was a chest containing the jewels of the guild, a box in which the common seal of the fraternity was stored, but also another chest, bound with iron, 'in which the muniments belonging to the mayor and community of the town are kept' (*in qua continentur munimenta tangencia ad maioralitatem et communitatem ville*).[31] The civic archive of the city was preserved within one of the guild's storage chests. The sharing of a building between a religious fraternity and a town council was far from unusual in late medieval England,[32] and it is possible that in Coventry the town government developed from the administrative structures provided by the fraternity at a time when the city's formal corporate existence was still relatively immature. Coventry, after all, acquired a mayor only in the middle of the fourteenth century, and the Coventry annals – a record of civic memory – only stretch back to this date.[33] Whatever the nature of the relationship between the fraternity and the urban authorities, the rebuilding of St Mary's Hall must be understood as both a reflection and a statement of the growth of Coventry's civic power structure in this period. The building was a seat of civic government, as well as a guildhall.

The tapestry

The multi-functional nature of St Mary's Hall from the early fifteenth century helps to set the context for the installation of the tapestry. There is no record of its commissioning. It has been linked on stylistic grounds to the Flemish city of Tournai and is tentatively ascribed to the workshop of the weaver, Arnould Poissonnier.[34] Visual evidence – notably the style of the costumes worn by the figures in the textile and the existence of a continuous floral border around the edge of the six compartments into which the tapestry is divided – dates it to approximately the beginning of the sixteenth century.[35] It was certainly hanging in St Mary's Hall in 1519, when the Holy Trinity fraternity, on the advice of the city's mayor and his brethren, paid two men 26*s* 8*d* to repair the 'cloth of aras', a description

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[31] *The Records of the Guild of the Holy Trinity, St. Mary, St. John the Baptist and St. Katherine of Coventry*, ed. G. Templeman (Dugdale Society, 19, 1944), 144.

[32] K. Giles, 'Public space in town and village 1100–1500', in K. Giles and C. Dyer (eds.), *Town and Country in the Middle Ages: Contrasts, Connections, and Interconnections, 1100–1500* (Leeds, 2005), 299.

[33] CRO PA 351/1, p. 15, PA 2/3, p. 41, PA 2/4, fol. 6v, PA 2/5; BL Harleian MS 6388, p. 6, and Additional MS 11364; Bodleian Library (Oxford), MS Top Warwickshire d.4; Birmingham Reference Library, MS 115915, and MS 273978; Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office (Stratford-upon-Avon), DR 37 box 123/7, fols. 3r, 15r. For the city's complicated early history, see R. Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation: Coventry, 1043–1355* (Woodbridge, 2004).

[34] Lancaster, *St Mary's Hall*, 42. On Poissonnier, see the brief note in G. Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry* (London, 1999), 368.

[35] Workshops started to add borders from the 1500s. I owe this information to Katherine Wilson.
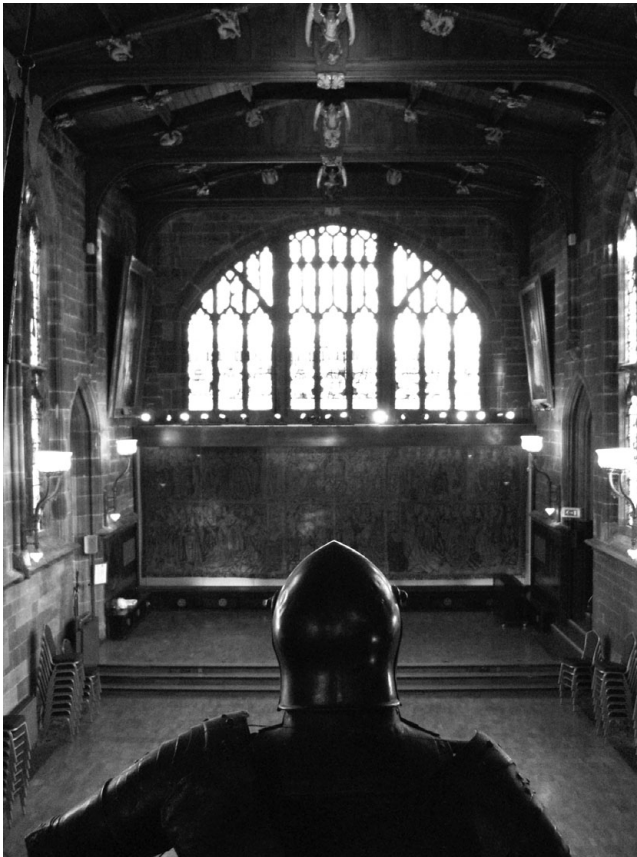
Figure 3: Interior of St Mary's Hall: the Great Hall

which here denoted not the geographical origin of the textile but a much more subjective perception of the high value of the object to its owner.[36] The tapestry was ordered specifically for the hall in which it still hangs, since it fits the dimensions of the great hall exactly (Figure 3). The internal architecture of the tapestry, namely the partition of the textile into three vertical sections, also corresponds precisely to the threefold division of the window above.

The tapestry is in fact divided vertically and horizontally into a total of six scenes (Figure 1). On the left hand side, at the bottom, is a kneeling figure of a king, with his courtiers behind him. Above the king, in a separate compartment, is a collection of male saints, ten of whom are

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[36] T. Sharp, *Illustrative Papers on the History and Antiquities of the City of Coventry* (Birmingham, 1871), 220; K. Wilson, *Courtly and Urban Tapestries of the Burgundian Dominions c. 1363–1500: Philip the Bold, John the Fearless and the Inhabitants of Douai, Dijon and Tournai* (Turnhout, forthcoming).

clearly identifiable as martyrs of the early Christian church. From left to right, they are saints Thaddaeus, Simon, Bartholomew, Andrew, George, Peter, Adrian, Paul, Matthias and, finally, St John the Baptist, holding the *Agnus Dei*. On the right hand side, and in perfect harmony with the scenes on the left, there is an image of a kneeling queen, accompanied by her ladies-in-waiting, and, above them, a series of female saints, nine of whom can be positively identified. These are, with three exceptions (Anne, Gertrude and Mary Magdalene), also early Christian martyrs. Moving into the centre, from right to left, they are saints Apollonia, Anne, Gertrude, Agnes, Margaret, Mary Magdalene, Dorothea, Barbara and Katherine. In the central vertical section, the lower panel shows the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary: the Virgin is surrounded by the twelve apostles, whilst angels accompany her ascent into Heaven. Above the Virgin is a greatly altered scene. The main figure is the personification of Justice (*iusticia*), who holds characteristically a pair of scales. This section has been rewoven and is a later insertion.[37] We cannot be sure when and why the excision took place. The original image was almost certainly the Holy Trinity. The presence of God the Father is intimated by the inclusion, above the head of Justice, of the tetragrammaton (the four-letter Hebrew name of God). On either side of the enthroned figure of Justice are angels carrying the instruments of Christ's crucifixion. The suggestion that the change was made for religious reasons, either in the later sixteenth or the seventeenth centuries,[38] ignores the awkward fact that the presence of other obviously popish imagery such as the Virgin Mary would surely have been of equal discomfort to Protestant sensibilities.

Whatever the reason for the removal of the Trinitarian image, the tapestry is a scene of religious worship and the sacred iconography is so powerful that the object must be understood as both an act of collective piety and a devotional aid. The regal persons are shown kneeling, as in prayer, and the eyes of the king and queen, along with the members of their respective households, point towards the Virgin Mary. The principal religious figures in the tapestry – as it would have looked in the early sixteenth century – are St John the Baptist, St Katherine, the Virgin Mary and the Holy Trinity. These were, of course, the patrons of the four separate fraternities which joined together officially in 1392 to form a single guild. The extant register of new admissions to this united fraternity duly begins: 'Here are the names of the brothers and sisters of the guild of Holy Trinity, St Mary, St John the Baptist and St Katherine of Coventry, living and dead' (*Hec sunt nomina fratrum et sororum Gilde sancte Trinitatis, sancte Marie, sancti Johannis Baptiste et sancte Katerine, Couentre, viua et mortua*).[39] In recalling the patronal saints of the Holy Trinity guild, the tapestry would have reminded the members of the fraternity of the different strands of its corporate

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[37] TCC report, no. 0154; M.D. Harris, *Life in an Old English Town* (London, 1898), 371.
[38] Kendrick, 'Coventry tapestry', 84; Lancaster, *St Mary's Hall*, 42.
[39] *Register of the Guild of the Holy Trinity*, ed. Harris, 1.

history and also acted as a powerful stimulus to communal devotion. As a representation of the collective identity of a religious fraternity, the tapestry in St Mary's Hall stands comparison with the famous frontispiece of the Luton Holy Trinity guild register, which begins in 1475, a year after the fraternity's foundation.[40] The opening decoration shows the founder of the guild, the bishop of Lincoln, kneeling before the enthroned Holy Trinity, with King Edward IV kneeling on the left hand side and his courtiers behind him, and Queen Elizabeth Woodville kneeling on the right hand side, accompanied by the women of her court (Figure 4). The same sense of balance, notably the division by gender, is to be found in the Coventry tapestry.

However, the Coventry tapestry, divided into two tiers, is more complex in its iconography. Its location in the town hall also meant that it could never just be a prized possession of a fraternity. Why else did it survive the Reformation of the 1530s and 1540s, when guilds such as Coventry's Holy Trinity fraternity were dissolved by royal decree? The tapestry in fact shows two courts, which are almost mirror images of each other: the heavenly court above, and the terrestrial court below. This unifying concept of the 'court' is crucial to a deeper and wider understanding of the meaning of the tapestry, which served earthly as well as spiritual purposes. The depiction of the court of Heaven is extremely familiar in western art from the Middle Ages.[41] It often stood in juxtaposition with an image of Hell, the former representing order and the latter disorder. It was also not unusual to find in medieval art and literature the pairing of the heavenly and earthly courts. Christ and the Virgin Mary were frequently distinguished as regal figures. From the twelfth century, the Virgin was typically cast as the Queen of Heaven.[42] One of the most striking pictures of the Virgin, depicted in this guise, is Simone Martini's early fourteenth-century fresco of the court of the Virgin and her angelic and saintly courtiers, which decorates a wall in the council hall of Siena's seat of civic government.[43] Conversely, earthly kings and queens were portrayed as types of Christ and Mary.[44] In this sense, the images of the king and queen in the Coventry tapestry mirrored those of the enthroned Holy Trinity and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, just as the ordinances regulating the household of the Yorkist ruler, Edward IV, imagined the hierarchy of the king's court as a likeness of the order of

[40] For further comment, see R. Marks, 'Two illuminated guild registers from Bedfordshire', in M.P. Brown and S. McKendrick (eds.), *Illuminating the Book: Makers and Interpreters* (London, 1998), esp. 121–2, and J.L. Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship 1445–1503* (Oxford, 2004), 251.

[41] I would like to thank my colleague, Richard Gameson, for discussion of this subject.

[42] Laynesmith, *Last Medieval Queens*, 31–4.

[43] D. Norman, *Siena and the Virgin: Art and Politics in a Late Medieval City State* (London, 1999), 48–58.

[44] For an example of the interplay of this typology, see the princely *adventus* into cities in the late Middle Ages: G. Kipling, *Enter the King: Theatre, Liturgy, and Ritual in the Medieval Civic Triumph* (Oxford, 1998).

Figure 4: Frontispiece of the Luton Holy Trinity Guild Register (Wardown Park Museum, Luton)

angels.[45] There was also an eastern Christian tradition of the idea of the earthly court as a reflection of the celestial court. In a Byzantine context, the imperial court at Constantinople was conceptualized as a mirror image of the heavenly realm, a concept which in turn was bound up in the wider notion of *taxis*, one of the principal organizing ideas in Byzantium.[46] *Taxis* meant 'order', and central to the concept was the belief that earthly society

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[45] Laynesmith, *Last Medieval Queens*, 251; K. Mertes, 'The *Liber Niger* of Edward IV: a new version', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 54 (1981), 37.

[46] H. Maguire, 'The heavenly court', in *idem* (ed.), *Byzantine Court Culture, 829–1204* (Washington, DC, 1997), 247–58; W.T. Woodfin, 'Celestial hierarchies and earthly hierarchies in the art of the Byzantine church', in P. Stephenson (ed.), *The Byzantine World* (London, 2010), 303–19; M.-F. Auzépy, 'Les aspects matériels de la taxis byzantine', *Bulletin*

and government were, and should be, a mirror of the harmony, equilibrium and hierarchy found in the celestial kingdom.

The Coventry tapestry conveyed a similar set of ideas. The design is perfectly symmetrical and is balanced, from left to right and from top to bottom: the former in terms of gender and the latter in the division of the two courts. The central roof bosses in the great hall, of angels carrying musical instruments, can only have added to the impression of heavenly order and peace. The textile itself also expressed a sense of hierarchy, since, although the two courts reflected each other, the relationship between the two was not equal. After all, it was the enthroned Trinity which originally occupied the central scene at the top of the tapestry. The earthly court was below. This was a depiction of a sacred notion of authority, descending from God to king. The power of this image of authority would have been reinforced when it is remembered that the tapestry hung at the dais end of the great hall. There was a raised platform at this end of the building.[47] Here, according to the 1441 guild inventory, was a bench covered with embroidered fabric and cushions decorated with the arms of the city, for the senior members of the Trinity guild and the mayor's brethren.[48] The tapestry enhanced the existing spatial hierarchy of the hall and, by the middle of the sixteenth century, the dais was also occupied by an elaborately carved oak seat for the mayor of the city.[49] The mayoral chair would have been situated below the tapestry, and the onlooker would have been struck forcibly by the clear delineation of a concept of authority, familiar in other cities in the late Middle Ages, which was derived ultimately from God and in which the mayor owed his legitimacy to the king, and the king in turn to his divine superior.[50] Just like the king and the royal court immediately above them, guild and civic officials were part of a terrestrial universe whose rulers were subject to celestial oversight and guidance.

Historical context

Yet, there was something else about the courtly scenes in the Coventry tapestry which would have had a more specific, local resonance. The meaning of the depiction of the earthly court is heightened by an appreciation of the whole *mise-en-scène* of the tapestry. Upon entering

du Centre de recherche du château de Versailles (online), Objets et insignes du pouvoir, mis en ligne le 16 juin 2008, consulté le 17 novembre 2010. http://crcv.revues.org/2253. I owe these references to my former colleague, Paul Stephenson.

[47] J.C. Lancaster, 'The city of Coventry: buildings: public buildings', in W.B. Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwick*, vol. VIII: *The City of Coventry and Borough of Warwick* (London, 1969), 141.

[48] *Records of the Guild of the Holy Trinity*, ed. Templeman, 143.

[49] For the chair, see R. Tittler, 'Seats of honor, seats of power: the symbolism of public seating in the English urban community, c. 1560–1620', *Albion*, 24 (1992), 211, and H. Cescinsky, 'An oak chair in S. Mary's Hall, Coventry', *Burlington Magazine*, 39 (Oct. 1921), 170–7.

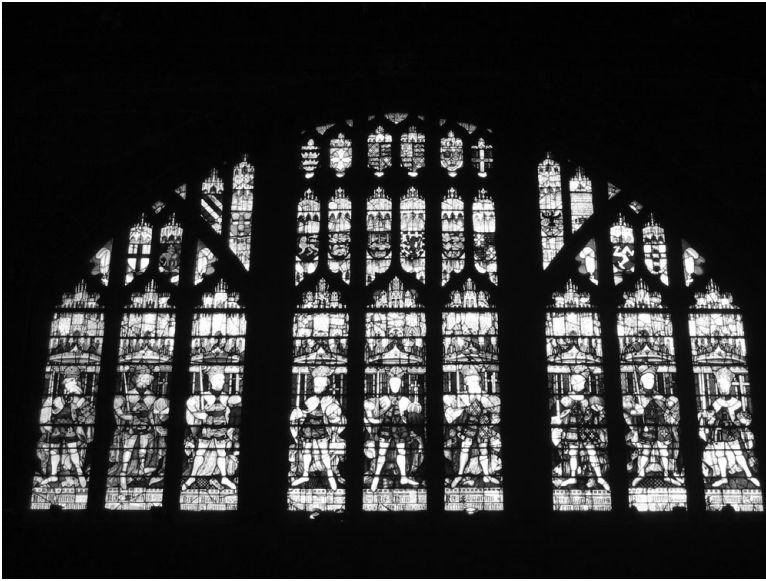[50] Cf. Rigby, 'Urban "oligarchy"', 65.

Figure 5: Cycle of kings in stained glass (above the tapestry)

the great hall today, the eye is drawn towards the north end, where the tapestry hangs below a large stained glass window, through which the light illuminates the entire space. There is debate about the date of this window, but far more certainty about the identity of those depicted. The window is divided into three main sections, each containing three lights, and each light is occupied by a royal figure (Figure 5). Under each king is a cursory, written inscription of the name of the monarch. The window has been greatly restored, notably in the late nineteenth century, and the figures are not in their original location.[51] There is also evidence that the cycle of kings was disturbed in the second half of the fifteenth century. The accounts of the Holy Trinity fraternity reveal that in 1471, the year of Edward IV's restoration to the throne, a craftsman was paid to change the king's arms.[52] The original arms belonged to Henry VI, whom the Yorkist king had displaced. The most recent analysis of the window argues that the label denoting Henry VI was reinstated permanently in the reign of Henry VII at the end of the fifteenth century.[53] When the Warwickshire antiquary, William Dugdale, recorded the details of the window in the mid-seventeenth century, he noted the names of eight kings: William the Conqueror, Richard I, Henry V, Henry IV, Emperor Constantine, King Arthur, Henry III and, finally, Henry VI.[54] The king he was unable to

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[51] The glass is examined in Rudebeck, 'John Thornton', 16.
[52] Sharp, *Illustrative Papers*, 218.
[53] Rudebeck, 'John Thornton', 30.
[54] Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, 120.

identify was Edward III. The latest study of the window has proposed a date of around 1420,[55] but it is not wholly convincing. In particular, the assumption that the window was a piece of royal propaganda ignores the interests of Coventry and of its ruling elite. On the basis of the inclusion of images of the three Lancastrian kings, Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI, and of those royal ancestors from whom the Lancastrian dynasty claimed descent, notably Henry III, Richard Marks has argued that the window dates from the mid-fifteenth century.[56] This is a much more persuasive case, since it was in this period that Coventry assumed a political significance – both local and national – which was unrivalled before or since.

The window's iconography acknowledged the debt which the city owed to its connection to Henry VI in the 1450s. In 1451, during the king's visit, Coventry's rulers negotiated a new royal charter which transformed the city into a county in its own right.[57] This type of charter was the most prestigious available for an English urban community, and placed Coventry on a par with other provincial capitals, such as Bristol, York and Norwich.[58] The various versions of the Coventry annals recognized the significance of the charter as a pivotal moment in the city's history. Several referred to it as the time when Coventry was 'Made a County and the County stones set up', the stones serving as boundary markers of the newly created shire.[59] Another redaction of the civic chronicle saw the charter as the point at which Coventry 'was made a Cittie'.[60] In the 1450s, Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou visited Coventry frequently, and the king was admitted to the Holy Trinity fraternity.[61] The earliest form of the Coventry annals, dating from around 1461, described the mayoralty of 1456 as the year that 'qwene Margaret came fyrst in to Coventre'.[62] The annalist was absolutely right, for it was in September 1456 that the king and queen began a period of royal residence in the city which would continue almost permanently until the summer of 1460.[63] The reasons for this shift in the royal itinerary, away from London and up to the Midlands, have been explained elsewhere.[64] From 1456 to 1460, Coventry was the *de facto* capital of England. Parliament met there in 1459, a great council assembled in the city, but, most of all, Coventry was the home of the royal court. The two royal figures in the tapestry were Henry VI and his wife, Queen Margaret of Anjou, benefactors of the city. The choice of imagery in the tapestry – the earthly and celestial court – deliberately recalled

[55] Rudebeck, 'John Thornton', 27.
[56] R. Marks, *Stained Glass in England during the Middle Ages* (London, 1993), 89.
[57] R.A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI* (new edn, Stroud, 1998), 777–8.
[58] C.D. Liddy, *War, Politics and Finance in Late Medieval English Towns: Bristol, York and the Crown, 1350–1400* (Woodbridge, 2005), 212.
[59] BL Additional MS 11364, fol. 6r; CRO PA 2/5, fol. 11v.
[60] BL Harleian MS 6388, p. 20.
[61] *Register of the Guild of the Holy Trinity*, ed. Harris, xxiv, 14.
[62] CRO PA 351/1, p. 16.
[63] Griffiths, *Reign of King Henry VI*, 785.
[64] *Ibid.*, 793.

this period of prominence for Coventry. The connection was strengthened by the close physical relationship between the tapestry and the window above, which glorified the Lancastrian dynasty through associations with legendary rulers such as Arthur and Constantine and which saw Henry VI as the climax of the royal cycle.

If the imagery in the tapestry had such significance to Coventry, the question is why the textile was installed around 1500. One answer could lie in the nature of Henry VII's own high regard for his uncle, Henry VI. Henry VII campaigned to secure the Lancastrian king's canonization and sought his re-burial at Westminster Abbey among the pantheon of English monarchs.[65] However, just as the tapestry had a local meaning, so it was custom-made for local reasons. It replaced an earlier textile, consisting of a much more generic design, which might have been found in any aristocratic residence. This piece of tapestry was described in the guild inventory of 1441 as 'vnum dorsour lyned with Canvas of Arras werk of hawkyng', presumably a depiction of a hunting scene.[66] The new tapestry, from around 1500, spoke specifically to a Coventry audience and it articulated a visual language of power, authority, hierarchy and order.

Although the great hall in St Mary's was a place where the members of the fraternity assembled four times a year, on the feast days of their four patronal saints,[67] it was not their chapel. That was dedicated to St John the Baptist and was located on the western edge of the walled city at Bablake. St Mary's Hall was much more continuously a site of civic government, where the city's mayor was elected, judicial decisions were made and communal assemblies gathered.[68] In contrast to Norwich where, from 1452, the outgoing mayor of the city automatically became the chief official of the guild of St George and the aldermen and common councillors were admitted as brethren of the fraternity without payment,[69] the Coventry Holy Trinity guild had a political importance within the city which was never formalized, but which was real all the same. Since its inception and, indeed, in its earlier form as a series of four separate fraternities, the Holy Trinity guild had played a major role in the governance of the city. Among the very first names entered into the extant register of the guild were those of the 12 men who were remembered in the Coventry annals as the founders and benefactors of the city: the people who had 'purchesyd the fredome of Coventre' in the middle of the fourteenth century, when Edward III formally incorporated the city and allowed Coventry to elect its

[65] *Ibid.*, 4–5.
[66] *Records of the Guild of the Holy Trinity*, ed. Templeman, 143.
[67] These communal feasts followed the special masses on the feasts of the Trinity, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St John the Baptist and St Katherine: Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, 122.
[68] Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 90, 162.
[69] B.R. McRee, 'Religious gilds and civic order: the case of Norwich in the late Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 67 (1992), 91.

own mayor.[70] Symptomatic of the close relationship between the fraternity and Coventry's governing elite was the inclusion, in the guild register, of a series of oaths, of both civic and guild officials, which are intermingled on the same folios.[71] By the later fifteenth century, membership of the Holy Trinity guild was part of both the life-cycle of the successful citizen and the *cursus honorum* for those aspiring to civic office. Mastership of the guild usually followed occupation of the mayoralty, and the former mayor was, as William Dugdale put it, expected to sit 'next to the [new] Mayor in all publique meetings'.[72] The tapestry symbolized the ties of solidarity between the civic elite and the fraternity. It was almost certainly a joint commission, which is why the textile was repaired in 1519 at the cost of the guild, but following the counsel of the mayor and his brethren.[73] The tapestry was a statement of the central place of the guild in urban politics and of the symbiotic relationship between the fraternity and the civic rulers in the governance of Coventry. Why might this statement have been necessary?

The period in which the tapestry was commissioned and installed was extraordinarily difficult for Coventry's rulers. It was a time of steady economic contraction, which was the consequence of both the decline of the English cloth trade and the financial and military impact of the Wars of the Roses in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. The former was more pernicious, since the prosperity of the city had been dependent upon its role as a major centre of textile manufacture; but the latter succeeded in draining the city periodically of huge sums of money.[74] Prolonged urban decline exacerbated longstanding conflict about access to Coventry's collective economic resources, represented by the common lands which encircled the walled city.[75] In a series of bills which appeared in 1495 and 1496, in public places in the city not far from St Mary's Hall, this conflict was imagined as a sharply polarized struggle between rich and poor, between the powerful and the powerless. The city, which had once been 'free', was now in bondage, and those who governed Coventry exploited and oppressed the commons, who were ready to rise up and, like a swarm of bees, 'styng' their persecutors.[76] There was a cluster of enclosure riots in the late fifteenth century – in 1481, 1489, 1494 and 1495 – several of which were indelibly scored into the collective memory of the city.[77] In

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[70] The quotation is from CRO PA 351/1, p. 15.
[71] *Records of the Guild of the Holy Trinity*, ed. Templeman, 1–33.
[72] Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 121, 126; Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, 123.
[73] Sharp, *Illustrative Papers*, 220.
[74] Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 41–3. For a more recent study which questions the picture of *general* decay within Coventry, see D. Leech, 'Stability and change at the end of the Middle Ages: Coventry, 1450–1525', *Midland History*, 34 (2009), 1–21.
[75] Harris, *Life in an Old English Town*, 206–52.
[76] *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, 567, 577–8.
[77] BL Harleian MS 6388, pp. 24–5; Bodleian Library MS Top Warwickshire d.4, fols. 12r, 13r; Birmingham Reference Library, MS 273978, fols. 4v–5r; CRO PA 2/4, fols. 13v, 14r; CRO PA 2/5, fols. 15r, 16v; Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office, DR 37 box 123/7, fols.

the first, the 'Commons rose', broke down an enclosure, rang the city's bell and stole the mayoral sword and mace from the mayor's house. In the laconic words of one Coventry annalist, in 1489, 'then the Commons of Coventry rose again'.[78] Internal unrest was such a characteristic feature of Coventry's political history in this period that in one version of the city's annals, the exceptional state of civic concord was worthy of comment. Under the entries for two mayoralties, the annalist wrote 'In his yeare was peace.'[79]

In addition to urban decline and social and political disorder, the civic rulers also confronted the challenge of heresy. There was a Lollard community active in Coventry between the 1480s and 1520s, most of whose members were artisans. Between 1511 and 1512, 64 suspected Lollards from Coventry were brought before the bishop of Coventry and Lichfield and his representatives. This official inquiry followed the prosecution of eight heretics from the Coventry community in 1486.[80] In the light of the close connections between the city's political elite and the Holy Trinity guild, Lollardy can only have been regarded as a threat to the authority of the city's magistrates. It was a heretical creed which denied the power of the saints and which therefore rejected many of the practices of the late medieval church. One of the most striking aspects of the charges levelled in 1486 was the repeated accusation that suspected Lollards had attacked the local shrine known as the 'image of Blessed Mary of the Tower', which was located in the city wall.[81] The penance imposed by the bishop included a pilgrimage to the shrine, where the recanted heretic was instructed to make an offering.[82] Coventry's town hall was, of course, dedicated to St Mary. The mayor's election and inauguration took place on the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.[83] The Virgin Mary was also one of the major patronal saints of the Holy Trinity fraternity. As in fifteenth-century Bristol, where Clive Burgess found a similar conjuncture of religion and elite politics, the threat of heresy played a role in the strengthening of relations between ecclesiastical authority and civic magistracy in the preservation of good order.[84]

18v–19r; BL Additional MS 11364, fol. 7r–v; *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, 491–2, 556–7, 570.

[78] CRO PA 2/4, fol. 14v.

[79] Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office, DR 37 box 123/7, fol. 7v.

[80] S. McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities 1420–1530* (Philadelphia, 1995), 23–5.

[81] *Lollards of Coventry 1486–1522*, ed. S. McSheffrey and N. Tanner (Camden 5th ser., 23, 2003), 16, 66, 67, 79–80; McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy*, 23; Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 21, 171–2.

[82] *Lollards of Coventry*, ed. McSheffrey and Tanner, 79–80. See also *ibid.*, 242, for evidence from 1512.

[83] Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 172.

[84] C. Burgess, 'A repertory for reinforcement: configuring Catholicism in fifteenth-century Bristol', in L. Clark (ed.), *Of Mice and Men: Image, Belief and Regulation in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2005), 99–122.

Audience

The Coventry tapestry had a political message and it was designed for several audiences. On the one hand, it was for the eyes of the city's ruling elite, whose members would have sat below it. It was a means to consolidate their group personality, to reinforce their overlapping identities, as aldermen, sheriffs, mayors and brethren of the guild, to bring them honour, and further to distinguish them as a group apart within urban society.[85] In October 1492, civic ordinances had been made with the same purpose in mind. These ruled that henceforth, 'eny man of worship within þis Citie' who had served as mayor, who had committed the sins of adultery, fornication or usury and who would not mend his ways, should 'be deprived of his cloke, & of the Counceill of this Cite, neuer to procede ferther to other office of worship as Maister of þe Gilde or other'.[86] If the offender were a lesser civic official or a citizen, he would not be allowed to proceed further through the *cursus honorum* of civic office. He would be wholly 'estraunged from all goode company'. Those who occupied positions of civic authority, and who might sit at the dais end of the great hall, were expected to live up to certain standards of moral behaviour. This kind of conduct had long been of concern to prestigious and exclusive fraternities such as the Holy Trinity guild.[87] An individual's morality helped to protect his reputation, but the subscription to a set of commonly agreed moral values was also a source of collective legitimacy for those in public office. The tapestry needs to be viewed, therefore, in the context of other initiatives in this period to construct a united group identity for Coventry's civic leaders. In particular, the central image of the Virgin Mary, along with the depiction of the full panoply of saints, angels and apostles, presented the elite as staunchly orthodox.

On the other hand, the tapestry had a more public audience. It was situated in the great hall, a place of civic authority, but also a space in which the power of Coventry's rulers had been contested by citizens and ordinary townspeople in the past. The Coventry annalists, for example, remembered St Mary's Hall as the building in which, during popular uprisings in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, the 'commons' repeatedly 'threw lovys [of bread]' at the mayor's 'hed'.[88] This was a form of collective protest directed symbolically at the head because, in the organological metaphor of the city, the mayor was the head of the urban body politic. The commons regarded the mayor as having failed in his

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[85] For a comparison with Norwich, see McRee, 'Religious gilds and civic order', 96–7.

[86] *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, 544.

[87] McRee, 'Religious gilds and civic order', 94. In the third quarter of the fourteenth century, members of the Holy Trinity guild had been expelled for offences such as fornication and adultery: Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 138 n. 7.

[88] CRO PA 351/1, p. 15; BL Harleian MS 6388, pp. 10, 12; BL Additional MS 11364, fol. 4r; Bodleian Library, MS Top Warwickshire d.4, fol. 4r; Birmingham Reference Library, MS 115915, and MS 273978, fol. 2v; CRO PA 2/3, p. 45, PA 2/4, fols. 7v–8r, and PA 2/5, fols. 4v, 6r; Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office, DR 37 box 123/7, fols. 3v, 16r.

duty to govern properly; he had not enforced the assize of bread.[89] The tapestry, accompanied by the window above it and the raised platform below it, conveyed notions of hierarchy and order, in which civic harmony was dependent upon everyone in urban society knowing his or her place. Most of all, the imagery at the dais end of the hall expressed a descending concept of authority, in which kings were subservient to God, urban magistrates were subject to kings and townspeople owed their obedience to civic leaders. It was a vision of an ideal society, which was also found in a legislative programme implemented in Coventry in 1492 and 1495.[90] Jeremy Goldberg has shown how these civic ordinances were 'arranged hierarchically' and were directed first at men of worship, then priests, followed by householders, tapsters, servants and apprentices and, finally, single women, who stood outside the ideal of the well-ordered household.[91] Their purpose was to restore a sense of balance and order, in part through the regulation of morals, but mostly through the reinforcement of the traditional structures of urban society and of the mutual obligations of rulers and ruled.

Conclusions

The Coventry tapestry can be used, therefore, to explore the character of what Shannon McSheffrey has described as a peculiarly urban kind of Catholicism – 'lay-centered' and 'civic-minded' – which emerged in major English towns in the second half of the fifteenth century.[92] As with André Vauchez's concept of 'civic religion',[93] the danger of the label 'civic Catholicism' is that it can encourage the rather presumptuous view that the 'sacred' was a resource which town rulers could appropriate solely and cynically for political purposes and risks diminishing the pervasive influence of religion within urban life.[94] Yet, if a narrowly utilitarian view of the power of religion is reductive, it is also important to recognize that Christianity did provide an imagery, vocabulary and set of practices which were of potential value to civic leaders. The commissioning of the Coventry tapestry in the town hall was more than a corporate act of worship and a

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[89] I would like to thank my student, Harriet Eales, for this point. The assize regulated the weight of bread, according to the price of grain.
[90] *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, 544–5, 567–9.
[91] P.J.P. Goldberg, 'Coventry's "Lollard" Programme of 1492 and the Making of Utopia', in R. Horrox and S. Rees Jones (eds.), *Pragmatic Utopias: Ideals and Communities 1200–1630* (Cambridge, 2001), 105–8. Where I differ strongly from this analysis is in the view that the 1492 programme constituted a 'Lollard' scheme. For a discussion of the relationship between the civic oligarchy of Coventry and the city's Lollard community, see McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy*, 37–45.
[92] McSheffrey, 'Jurors, respectable masculinity, and Christian morality', 277; *idem, Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture*, 185.
[93] A. Vauchez, 'Introduction', in *idem* (ed.), *La religion civique à l'époque médiévale et moderne: Chrétienté et Islam* (Rome, 1995), 1–5.
[94] G. Rosser, 'Urban culture and the church 1300–1540', in Palliser (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, 347–8.

means to promote religious salvation among the community of the faithful. It was a fairly blunt political statement about the distribution of power within the city and of the commitment of the city's rulers to a hierarchical understanding of divine order. This directness betrayed anxiety rather than confidence within the city council.

Closer examination of the historical context reveals the unease which urban magistrates experienced in this period. Andy Wood has written perceptively that 'there seems to have been a particularly anxious quality to the assertion of urban authority in early modern England'.[95] This was as true of early Tudor England as it was of the mid-sixteenth century. City rulers felt compelled to demonstrate their legitimacy publicly. In the construction of oligarchy, they sought to access multiple sources of authority, and they communicated their power in various media. In Bristol, a town also suffering from economic decay and political dislocation, the urban elite turned to history and another form of material culture to reinforce its position, when one of the town's mayors commissioned the production of the urban chronicle and custumal known as *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*.[96] The *Kalendar*, dating from around 1480, contains the extraordinary image of Bristol's supposed foundation as an ancient Christian community, its four central streets forming a cross and converging at the town's high cross (*alta crux*). In Coventry, the city's rulers invoked the power of the sacred and placed themselves in the company of kings, saints, angels and apostles; they highlighted their privileged status as members of the Holy Trinity guild and drew on some of its moralistic rhetoric; and they consciously looked backwards to a 'golden age' in the mid-fifteenth century, when the city was the capital of England, because the present was troubled and the future uncertain.

Was the political arena in cities such as Coventry contracting or expanding at the end of the Middle Ages? A detailed, contextual study of the Coventry tapestry in St Mary's Hall does not provide a straightforward answer to this question, but illuminates instead an important truth. Civic rulers operated in a political sphere which was marked by a distinctive mixture of power and vulnerability, autonomy and dependence. These seemingly contradictory qualities shaped the protean and fluid character of urban politics between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period.[97] They contributed to a dynamic urban political culture, defined by conflict, debate and negotiation rather than by the triumph of oligarchy.

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[95] A. Wood, 'Kett's Rebellion', in C. Rawcliffe and R. Wilson (eds.), *Medieval Norwich* (London, 2004), 292.

[96] *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. L.T. Smith (Camden Society n.s., 5, 1872); P. Fleming, 'Making history: culture, politics and *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*', in D.L. Biggs *et al.* (eds.), *Reputation and Representation in Fifteenth-Century Europe* (Brill, 2004), 289–316.

[97] A. Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2002), 116.