

Issues in Review

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Saint Plays

British Saint Play Records: Coping with Ambiguity

In a recent article, Lawrence Clopper has provided a sceptical survey of the texts and records of the saint play in England which argues that the genre was relatively insignificant in the history of medieval drama in Britain.¹ In his list of texts and references compiled from various sources, he allows only five play texts and fragments and three lost plays out of a total of fifty-five to be verifiably plays on the lives of saints. Except for records which Clopper accepts as indicative of saint play performance at Lydd, London, and York,² the others are identified by him as 'either doubtful, for lack of evidence, or erroneous, when the extant evidence argues against their being saint plays'.³ Scepticism here is healthy, since it forces scholars to re-examine the evidence, much of which of necessity is ambiguous. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of looking at all the records presently available of lost entertainments that may be saint plays is ultimately convincing in spite of the need to recognize that distinctions between plays – scripted, orally transmitted, or improvised – and pageantry are more often than not blurred.⁴ Such plays would have had a natural attractiveness in a time when devotion to saints on a communal as well as individual basis was strong. The evidence for this appears in the iconography of churches and in the relics which they contained, while not surprisingly a major element in pageantry was hagiographic display. Possibly more characters of saints appeared in processions than any other single type of character.⁵ In France, across the Channel, more than a hundred play texts of saint plays survive,⁶ and I think we may be certain that if the Reformation had not suppressed play texts as well as performances, we would have a great many more English examples available for our study.

Part of the difficulty with Clopper's approach is that he defines the saint

play narrowly as ‘scripted drama’, a designation that is hard to prove with regard to lost plays and entertainments, and would exclude any example of unscripted traditional drama such as we probably have in many instances of records reporting St George. In one case, however, he seriously misinterprets a Martyrdom of St George play which was in fact scripted. The St George play staged at Bassingbourne in Cambridgeshire on 20 July 1511 had a script rented from a property-player named Pike, whose involvement with the actual production of the play probably included directing it, as well as the assistance of the Cambridge waits and minstrels.⁷ Oddly, Clopper also would exclude liturgical plays such as the apparent *Peregrinus* recorded at Lincoln in 1323–4 or the Assumption of the Virgin, presented over a period of more than a century and a half (1393–1561) at the same site.⁸ It is true that the one was a biblical play dramatizing the Emmaus story, and that the other involved the use of a mechanical device, perhaps utilizing a statue of the Virgin which was raised to the roof of the cathedral nave as in the present-day Elche play of the Assumption of the Virgin. But the grounds for exclusion seem to me to be far too rigid in these cases. Hard-and-fast categories do not adapt themselves very well to the records, for we often cannot distinguish the extent of dialogue or the presence of mime in either vernacular or Latin music-drama performances. It seems to be the better part of wisdom therefore to include and study together all the records that might signify a saint play of some sort or a pageant, which to be sure might have involved a scripted presentation, as was verifiably the case for royal entries.

Further, since on the whole the terminology used to denote staged drama was remarkably flexible,⁹ it is misleading to insist on the identification of one category, ‘*miracula*’, as designating a single genre of plays that were felt to be deserving of approbation. A key text here involves the well-known description of an event at Dunstable in which one Geoffrey had made a ‘*quemdam ludum de Sancta Katerina, – quem “Miracula” vulgariter appellamus*’, and borrowed choir copes from the abbey at St Albans for his pupils to wear in it (c. 1100–19).¹⁰ Clopper refers to an earlier article in which he has argued that the purpose of this ‘*ludus*’ was simply ‘play’, a game in which, he speculates, the little clergeons in Geoffrey’s school might likely ‘let off steam’ and ‘detonate their Catherine’s wheel’.¹¹ The presence of fireworks would have provided an explanation for the fire that destroyed the copes, but all of this is quite impossible since gunpowder was not introduced in Europe until the fourteenth century, and the St Catherine’s wheel as a fireworks display of the type Clopper has in mind apparently did not appear until much later. Further, risking choir copes in juvenile horseplay seems not likely in the light of

the high cost of linen at that time, and this in addition to the appropriateness of vestments for the medieval music-drama, which not implausibly could have blended Latin and vernacular verses. The use of the term 'miracula' would have been to limit 'ludus', a common rhetorical practice and one which here rules out the other possible meaning of 'game'.¹²

Another instance in which the term 'ludus' is combined in the dramatic records with 'miracula' occurred at or near Gloucester in 1283. In an account of alms given at the visit of Edward I to Gloucester, 26s 8d was given to the clerics responsible for a play ('ludus'), designated as 'miracula sancti Nicholai', and the boy bishop.¹³ Of course there is plenty of uncertainty with the terminology here, and it is even unclear where the performance occurred (Peter Greenfield suggests Llanthony Abbey, outside Gloucester¹⁴), but we do know that it took place on the eve of the feast of St Nicholas, a time normally associated with revelry. Might we not have a play like Hilarius' *Iconia*, described as a 'ludus', or the similar Fleury play, which begins with the words 'Aliud miraculum de Sancto Nicholao et de quodam Iudeo'?¹⁵ Admittedly, we cannot prove that what we have here is a St Nicholas play of this type, and the example is in fact a good example of the kind of ambiguity that we need to acknowledge.

It would seem, according to Clopper's list, that references that appear to be saint plays in such sources as mayors' lists and chronicles are unreliable sources of information, and of course well they might be. However, as historians have learned, documents of this kind are also very often invaluable. The *London Chronicle's* reference to St Catherine in 1393 ('In this yere was the pley of seynt Katerine'¹⁶) perhaps would need further corroboration to ascertain its precise status, but I would suggest that it probably does belong in the same category as two plays cited in Coventry annals. Both were presented in the Little Park outside the city walls, in 1491 'A Play of St Katherine in the Little Parke'¹⁷ – a choice of subject matter that would be consistent with local devotion to this saint, who was one of the patrons of one of two major guilds of the city – and in 1505 a 'Play' at Whitsun, the date also chosen for the cycle plays at Chester. The subject of the latter was an unlikely enough one – the Irish Cistercian monk St Christian – but the annals listing is corroborated by an independent document, the Proof of Majority of Walter Smythe, which identifies the production as a 'Magnus ludus vocatus seynt christeans play' and specifies that it was presented at Pentecost.¹⁸

The Shrewsbury SS Felician and Sabina in 1515–16 and St Catherine in 1526 undoubtedly were scripted drama, and thus it is hard to see why they should be rejected by Clopper. Very likely these plays bore some resemblance

to the Coventry plays – and possibly the London St Catherine – cited above. The Shrewsbury plays were both presented under official auspices, one of them verifiably at Whitsun, and were shown at the dry quarry outside the city. The reference in the bailiffs' accounts to SS Felician and Sabina describes a 'play', 'show', and 'martyrdom', and specifically notes that it was presented 'for the honour of the said town'.¹⁹ The 'players of the same martyrdom' received ten shillings.²⁰ The bailiffs' accounts for the 'Saynt Katheryn is play' suggest an elaborate production with expenditures for wigs, false beards, fool's mask, gold and silver leaf, bells (six dozen!), and gunpowder for pyrotechnic effects.²¹ These would be quite appropriate to a St Catherine play based on her 'vita', though of course other costumes and equipment, some of which was perhaps provided by the players themselves, would have been needed. The payments for the latter play were made two days after Corpus Christi, which occurred on 31 May 1526, so it may have been mounted at that time rather than at Whitsun.

While it is not known precisely what was presented in the three-day performance of the Christina play that occurred at Bethersden in 1519–21, the presence of playwardens, rehearsals, banns, a deviser and his equipment (in other words, a 'property player'), a dressing chamber, and a stage would argue strongly for a large production of a type related instead to the gargantuan theatrical events that were mounted on the Continent.²² Unlikely as St Christina of Markyate (*c* 1097–*c* 1161) might seem for such a production, the play may well have adapted episodes from the lives of other saints, perhaps even episodes in the standard repertory of the deviser who had come in to direct the play. In spite of the ambiguity and the isolated provincial town in Kent in which the play was mounted, the record can hardly be arbitrarily set aside as doubtful. It should be remembered that sparsely populated Cornwall could still produce the elaborate *St Meriasek* – in Cornish, no less, and hence not accessible except as pure spectacle to Anglophones from nearby counties.²³

A very different kind of show seems to have been involved in the Thomas Becket pageant at Canterbury between 1504 and its suppression as well as its revival during the reign of Queen Mary. While mainly the pageant has been thought to be little more than a tableau vivant showing the martyrdom of the saint (only in the records for 1542–3, after the suppression of Thomas' cult by the crown, is the pageant specifically called a 'play', a designation which here is particularly problematic),²⁴ the earlier records suggest some interesting properties and details. The scene was presented on a wagon, which was moved about by men and, in 1514–15, with the help of a horse; it required repairs and painting, and was stored when not in use. The wagon was fitted

with a painted cloth. The saint seems to have been a puppet or image, whose head frequently needed painting and repairs from the constant battering in representations of his martyrdom. A bag of blood was used for the effect displayed when the knights, played by children, struck him. There was a 'vyce' or mechanical device, perhaps to fly the (puppet) angel who, according to the saint's 'vita,' appeared at his requiem mass.²⁵ The action seems to have been confined to a single scene, but it was the crucial one in the life of the saint, whose cult flourished in England after his murder in 1170. Though ambiguous on many points, the pageant nevertheless is consistent with the principal Becket scene depicted in iconography, and hence we are able to know something of its possible appearance even though the evidence of the records is scanty.

A more complex narrative of the life of Becket seems to have been exhibited in a pageant in the Midsummer Show in London in 1519 since the characters included not only Becket, who was shown at his martyrdom, but also his father Gilbert and his mother, identified here as the Jewess, though in the legendary life of the saint she is a Saracen princess.²⁶ A jail, with a jailer, was provided for Gilbert, and one of the knights was called Tracy at the martyrdom. The 'crosarius', Edward Grim, was also present at Becket's death. The iconography of the early life of Becket can be studied at York in painted glass panels,²⁷ and hence we may have some idea of the possible appearance of the scene, but the bare lists which comprise the dramatic records can only tease us with their incompleteness.

A separate classification of saint plays and pageants devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary seems required for plays of the miracles of the Virgin and also for episodes derived from biblical and apocryphal accounts of her life. Two fragments, *Dux Moraud* and the *Durham Prologue*, seem to be portions of miracles of Our Lady plays,²⁸ but one of the plays stitched into the N-town manuscript is verifiably a Mary play that dramatizes her early legendary life.²⁹ The immense popularity of Mary and the dimensions of devotion directed to her would suggest her early life and her death, assumption, and coronation as ideal for dramatic presentation.³⁰ According to antiquarian annals, the play chosen for presentation before Prince Arthur at Chester on 3 or 4 August 1499 was the 'Storie of the Assumption of oure Ladye ... played at the abbey gates'.³¹ If these annals are correct, the play was also intended for local audiences, for it is reported to have been repeated at the high cross. The Assumption of the Virgin was also played, along with the *Shepherds' play*, in St John's churchyard in 1515-16.³² If the Assumption play involved the pageant and play from the Chester cycle, another significant detail may be noted: the play,

at least within the context of the cycle, was under the sponsorship of 'þe Wyfus of þe town'.³³ Unfortunately, quite certainly due to the influence of Protestant iconoclasm, the Assumption play was to be removed from the text of the Chester Whitsun cycle and hence does not appear in any of the manuscripts.

Assumption of the Virgin plays had the advantage of requiring spectacular effects utilizing stage machinery which would lift the actress or a substituted image into 'heaven' for her coronation, as noted above in connection with the Lincoln play. But other saints' lives commonly demanded moving effects, particularly when they depicted suffering and martyrdom. If the Ashmole Fragment was part of a saint play of St Lawrence,³⁴ it would have concluded with the death of the saint on a fiery grill, presumably followed by the ascent of his soul into heaven. Even more graphic would have been the play or pageant of St Erasmus at Perth which included a cord-drawer who, along with other tormentors, would have appeared to pull out the saint's intestines, probably on a winch as was conventional in iconography.³⁵ Whether the martyrdom plays were fully scripted or orally transmitted plays, pageants with some action, or improvised drama, they would seem to have served, along with the presentation of violence in the plays of the Passion, to establish a taste for seeing stage suffering with realistic effects such as stage blood and with the death of the character with whom one empathizes.

The above defence of the saint play as a popular genre does not deny the uncertainties and the ambiguities involved, and Clopper's work in forcefully emphasizing these ambiguities should be seen as a useful scholarly service. Each example needs to be examined carefully and judged tentatively rather than with certainty in instances in which certitude is not allowed under the rules of evidence. The reference to a play ('ludus') of St James 'in sex paginis compilatum' in the will of William Revetour at York would seem to be an actual play about this apostle since it is listed along with another play title, 'le Crede Play'.³⁶ A play about St James would indeed have been appropriately given to the St Christopher guild, which held a feast annually on the feast day of St James, 25 July – a day that was also a feast of St Christopher. To suggest, as Clopper does, that the book might have been an 'ordo' for a riding of St James³⁷ seems very much less likely. Similar logic may be applied to Robert Lasingby's will of 1456 in which he gives a book of a play of St Denys ('ludum Oreginale Sancti Dionisij') to his parish church of St Denys.³⁸ Here one would not expect Lasingby to give to the church in his will what already is the church's play. But above all in these cases and in all the other instances in which we may be seeing records of actual saint plays, we need to avoid

imagining that the form and shape of any missing plays would necessarily be similar to the extant plays of *Mary Magdalene* or *The Conversion of St. Paul* in Digby MS 133 which are two East Anglian dramas that might not be typical in the least.³⁹

The ambiguities of the historical records, then, will continue to serve as a source of frustration to scholars unless the evidence, incomplete as it is, can be placed within the larger social and religious context. The plays and pageants existed in between the people's piety and anxiety over their spiritual condition on the one hand, and on the other their desire for entertainment and release from the concerns of everyday life. A third factor, especially important in the case of some of the saint plays, was economic, as at Braintree, Essex, where fund-raising for the church building fund was the motive for playing.⁴⁰ Scholarly methodology which attempts to separate out the lost plays definitively and interrogates the records for information that cannot be obtained will not in the end achieve particularly illuminating results. I would therefore call for an interdisciplinary approach in which the plays and pageants are recognized to be integral to the community, to its people, and to all dimensions of their lives.

Further, the plays were spectacles, designed to be seen as well as heard, and their visual effects were often shared with such media as painted glass, wall paintings, alabaster carvings, and even manuscript illuminations. Their iconography, even if the texts are lost, is therefore, at least as if through a glass darkly, available to us. If we must live with shadows of English saint plays and pageants, at least we can see art that is contemporary with them and that hence represented the visual imagination of artists who worked in the same cities or regions as the playwrights, producers, and actors. It is still valid to speak of the 'reciprocal illumination'⁴¹ that took place between the visual arts and the theatre that we still call 'medieval' or, by analogy with music of the period, 'early'.

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Notes

- 1 Lawrence M. Clopper, 'Communitas: The Play of Saints in Late Medieval and Tudor England', *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995 (for 1992)), 81–109.
- 2 These are *St. George at Lydd, Kent*; *Thomas Becket at London in 1170–82*; and *St George at York in 1554*. To allow inclusion of the play of *Thomas Becket*, martyred in 1170, is odd here since there is no evidence in William

Fitzstephen's *Descriptio Londoniae* for any specific saint plays except to divide them into two groups: confessors and martyrs.

- 3 Clopper, 'Communitas', 105.
- 4 A listing of English saint plays and pageants (but not individual characters who merely walked in processions) appears on the Web: <<http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/research/edam/index.html>>. This list is scheduled for publication in *The Early Drama, Art, and Music Review*.
- 5 See the index to Ian Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: A Chronological Topography to 1558* (Toronto, 1984), especially 602–5. For some factors in the choice of subjects for saint plays, pageants, and processional figures, see V.M. O'Mara, 'Saints' Plays and Preaching: Theory and Practice in Late Medieval Sanctoral Sermons', *Leeds Studies in English* 29 (1998), 257–74.
- 6 Lynette R. Muir, 'The Saint Play in Medieval France', in *The Saint Play in Medieval Europe*, Clifford Davidson (ed) (Kalamazoo, MI, 1986), 124.
- 7 Clopper discounts specific reference to 'a playe book', costumes, and props as well as a playing place in this case and instead suggests that a procession with an 'effigy' of St George was involved ('Communitas', 91–2, 105). See J.C. Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts from the Fourteenth Century to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1913), 270–4. As Anne L. Brannen explains, however, the 'play was part of a major and long-term project in the parish, which culminated in the purchase of a St. George statue for the church' in 1523 ('Parish Play Accounts in Context: Interpreting the Bassingbourn St George Play', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 35 (1996), 55–72, especially 56). Brannen also identifies the play as a martyrdom play.
- 8 Clopper, 'Communitas', 87.
- 9 See John Coldewey, 'Plays and "Play" in Early English Drama', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 28 (1985), 181–8; Abigail Ann Young, 'Plays and Players: The Latin Terms for Performance', *REED Newsletter* 9 (1984), 56–62, 10 (1985), 9–16; and Glending Olson, 'Plays as Play: A Medieval Ethical Theory of Performance and the Intellectual Context of the Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge', *Viator* 26 (1995), 195–221.
- 10 Thomas of Walsingham, *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani*, H. T. Riley (ed), 3 vols, Rolls Ser 28 (1867–9), 1.73.
- 11 Lawrence M. Clopper, 'Miracula and *The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*', *Speculum* 65 (1990), 885. For St Catherine's wheels, see Philip Butterworth, *Theatre of Fire: Special Effects in Early English and Scottish Theatre* (London, 1998), 111–12, fig 26.
- 12 Young, 'Plays and Players', pt. 1, 57. To be sure, there is still considerable

- ambiguity with regard to the term 'miracle' as it is used in the account of the Dunstable example. When we consider the categories of 'ludus' which Olson has noted in pseudo-Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum morale*, the Dunstable St Catherine may have fit the category of 'ludus devotionis' or even 'ludus innocentiae', but in my view would hardly have fallen among examples of 'ludus derisionis' or 'ludus insolentiae' (Olsen, 'Plays as Play', 220).
- 13 Audrey Douglas and Peter Greenfield (eds), *Cumberland/Westmorland/Gloucestershire*, REED (Toronto, 1986), 290, 388.
 - 14 Douglas and Greenfield, *Cumberland*, 422.
 - 15 Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1933), 2.338, 344.
 - 16 *A Chronicle of London from 1089 to 1483*, Edward Tyrell and Nicholas H. Nicolas (ed) (London, 1827), 80.
 - 17 R.W. Ingram (ed) *Coventry*, REED (Toronto, 1981), 74.
 - 18 Ingram, *Coventry*, 100, 128.
 - 19 I quote from the translation in J.A.B. Somerset, *Shropshire* (ed) 2 vols, REED (Toronto, 1994), 2.591; the Latin terms are 'ludus', 'demonstracio', and 'martirium' (1.172).
 - 20 'Et in Regardo dato lusoribus eiusdem Martirij tunc temporis hoc anno x s.' (Somerset, *Shropshire*, 1.172). Clopper suggests ('*Communitas*', 88) that 'lusores' 'could mean either musicians or gamesmen'. Young notes that the most common meaning was 'player', but could also refer to a player 'in a mixed musical and dramatic performance' ('Plays and Players', pt. 1, 61).
 - 21 Somerset, *Shropshire*, 1.183-4.
 - 22 *Churchwardens' Accounts at Bettrysden, 1515-1573*, Francis R. Mercer (ed), Kent Record Society, no 5 (Ashford, Kent, 1928), 3-5, 9-12, 78-80.
 - 23 See *Beunans Meriasek: The Life of Saint Meriasek, Bishop and Confessor*, Whitley Stokes (ed and trans) (London, 1872), and Rosalind Conklin Hays, C.E. McGee, Sally L. Joyce, and Evelyn S. Newlyn, *Dorset/Cornwall*, REED (Toronto, 1999), 543-4, 554; for commentary on the sparse population of Cornwall and the geography of the Cornish language, see Gloria Betcher, 'A Reassessment of the Date and Provenance of the Cornish *Ordinalia*', *Comparative Drama* 29 (1995-6), 438-9, 448-9.
 - 24 Giles E. Dawson (ed), *The Records of Plays and Players in Kent*, Malone Society Collections 7 (1965), 198. One possibility is a Protestantization of the Becket play to please the authorities.
 - 25 Dawson, *Records of Plays*, 192-8.
 - 26 *A Calendar of Dramatic Records in the Books of the Livery Companies of London*,

1485–1640, Jean Robertson and D. J. Gordon (eds), *Malone Society Collections* 3 (1954), 3–4.

- 27 This glass was formerly at the church of St Wilfrid, and now divided between the York Minster Chapter House and the church of St Michael-le-Belfry; see Clifford Davidson, 'The Middle English Saint Play', in *The Saint Play in Medieval Europe*, 57–9.
- 28 See Constance B. Heatt, 'A Case for *Duk Moraud* as a Play of the Miracles of the Virgin', *Mediaeval Studies* 32 (1970), 345–51; and Stephen K. Wright, 'The Durham Play of Mary and the Poor Knight: Sources and Analogues of a Lost English Miracle Play', *Comparative Drama* 17 (1983), 254–65.
- 29 See Peter Meredith (ed), *The Mary Play From the N.town Manuscript* (London, 1987).
- 30 See Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion* (Chicago, 1989), 137–76.
- 31 Lawrence M. Clopper (ed), *Chester*, REED (Toronto, 1979), 21.
- 32 Clopper, *Chester*, 23–4.
- 33 Clopper, *Chester*, 23.
- 34 For the identification of this fragment as a saint play of St. Lawrence, see Stephen K. Wright, 'Is the Ashmole Fragment a Remnant of a Middle English Saint Play?' *Neophilologus* 75 (1991), 139–49.
- 35 Anna J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (1927; rpt New York and London, 1969), 271–3.
- 36 Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (eds), *York*, 2 vols, REED (Toronto, 1979), 1.68; for the full text of Revetour's will, see Alexandra F. Johnston, 'William Revetour, Chaplain and Clerk of York, Testator', *Leeds Studies in English* 29 (1998), 153–72, especially 163.
- 37 Clopper, 'Communitas', 96.
- 38 Johnston and Rogerson, *York*, 1.8.
- 39 Another source of ambiguity in the study of the saint play is suggested by a case to which Olson ('Plays as Play', 201) calls attention in Henry of Rimini's *Tractatus de quatuor virtutibus cardinalibus* (Strassburg, 1472), 4.4.7: a Venetian play about the Virgin Mary was created originally in her honour, and was acceptable when it maintained a proper devotional purpose. Now, however, the play has been subject to abuse and deserves to be suppressed or reformed.
- 40 W. A. Mephram, 'Mediaeval Plays in the 16th Century at Heybridge and Braintree', *Essex Review* 55 (1946), 14–16.
- 41 The term is F.P. Pickering's; see his *Literature and Art in the Middle Ages* (Coral Gables, Florida, 1970). The methodology described here is that followed in my 'Middle English Saint Play'.

Why Are There So Few English Saint Plays?

I have expressed the title of my paper as a question that I cannot answer; however, I think it might be useful to approach the matter of saint plays with the question in mind. In my work on the saint play I have argued against the tradition that saint plays were the most numerous and oldest form of religious drama on the grounds that we have mistaken many 'ludi' or 'plays' of a saint for an enactment of the saint's life when the records often refer to other forms of celebration on a saint's feast day.¹ My working definition of a saint play is that it enacts the 'vita' of a saint or some crucial moment in the saint's life. I am thinking of a play like the *Mary Magdalen*, which contains the whole life of the saint as we have it in the *Legenda aurea*, the *South English Legendary* or other related texts, or the incident of Saul's conversion as we have it from Acts in the *Conversion of St Paul*. Of course, even a simple definition such as this has its weaknesses. We have records of St George and the dragon that suggest there was a fight during or at the end of a procession, and there are tableaux in which saints make speeches to greet a monarch or some other dignitary.² The latter do not intrude much on my working definition since the saint's speech is usually tailored to the person being greeted rather than being a historical account of the saint's own life. St George's fight with the dragon, on the other hand, is an enactment of an event in the saint's life, but I think it more spectacle than historical representation and probably without dialogue.

My admittedly sceptical analysis of the data available to me at the time I wrote *Communitas* argued that beyond the four extant texts and fragments remaining to us (see my Appendix, items 1–3, 5), there were few records to suggest dramatizations of saints' 'vitae' like those of St George at Lydd, perhaps as early as 1456, and at York in 1554 (items 7–8). Other scholars would allow more than I, but even a generous accounting of the records does not render a large number of saint plays.³

I do not believe that the incomplete historical record can account for the paucity of evidence. To be sure, if we had more records, we would have more instances of saint plays, but we have enough representative records to indicate that there was not the widespread phenomenon that has been posited in the past. For example, the 1389 guild returns regarding possessions and activities show no evidence of saint plays and only a few quasi-ceremonial representations of saints.⁴ Perhaps these returns are too early to register saint play activity, but if we turn to the Edwardian inventories, we do not find a significantly different situation. Many of the London inventories and the parish

accounts, several of which go well back into the fifteenth century, contain records of St Nicholas bishops and other quasi-dramatic presentations (readings of the Passion or Palm Sunday prophets, for example) but no saint plays.⁵ If we look to areas that have extensive records of dramatic activity, East Anglia, Essex, and Kent (as opposed to the west of England), and if we focus on the late Middle Ages and early sixteenth century when we would expect to find evidence of saint play activity, we do not find it.⁶ Again, it is not that we do not have some fairly extensive records of town expenditure on ceremony and spectacle but that there is little evidence of the performance of saint plays. Instead, we find processions on saints' feasts, church ales, and other games. If we had more records, we might come up with a few more saint plays, but the records we have indicate that there is not a tradition of saint plays in this dramatically rich area.

The English situation is mirrored in other parts of northern Europe. Germany, which has quite a number of surviving Easter and Christmas texts as well as other religious ones, has few saint plays or references to them.⁷ There are not many medieval records for the Low Countries before the late fifteenth century, but there seem to be even fewer saint plays and most of the ones recorded are Marian plays.⁸ France is the anomaly in that there are numerous extant texts, some quite lengthy, as well as many references to performances.⁹ Italy and Spain, to the south, also have saint play traditions.¹⁰ With a few exceptions, saint plays, no matter where they occur, are a late medieval and early modern phenomenon. Most come from the closing years of the fifteenth century or from the sixteenth century.¹¹

The lateness of vernacular saint plays undoubtedly reflects the increasing interest among the laity in the cult of the saints, but why then are there so few dramatic representations of saints' lives in most of northern Europe and England? One might suppose that there was some reluctance to staging the violence visited upon saintly martyrs were it not for the fact that medieval and early modern playwrights staged Christ's Passion in horrid detail.¹² And could anything be worse – or even risk the laughter of the audience – than the gruesome events of the Play of the Sacrament? It would not appear that stage violence in itself would hinder the production of saint plays.

If we look at the nature of the cult of saints, perhaps we can find some rationale for their absence from the dramatic repertory. Eamon Duffy has shown that the most popular saints of the later Middle Ages represented on panels were female saints, especially those from the early Christian period who suffered great physical mutilation as a consequence of their resistance to pagan monarchs and governors.¹³ There are, of course, exceptions: the cult of

Mary Magdalene was very important in the later Middle Ages as was that of Helena for much of the medieval period in England. Duffy goes on to argue that there is a certain contradiction in the reverence for virgin martyrs by laywomen, for whom chastity is not an example to be followed. He believes that the saint's chastity and resistance are the validating factors of the saint's power, and that it is the power to protect and to provide that is of utmost importance in the cult. These saints do not call their worshippers away from the world but offer help in it.¹⁴

If we look at the two most popular male saints in England, we see a related displacement of their legends. St George appears in a number of venues. Setting aside his participation in folk plays, he is often portrayed with his dragon in painting, sculpture, glass, processions, and entries. The focus is universally on the fight with the dragon rather than his martyrdom.¹⁵ The fight not only offers the opportunity for spectacle but also symbolically represents a central Christian truth – that the archenemy will ultimately be defeated. And since St George from the fourteenth century onward was the patron saint of England, he is also the saint who protects that most Christian land. St George at least remains attached to one of the events in his legend, but St Thomas Becket is frequently divorced from his. Although we have records of the use of Becket images in processions and possibly in plays, he is more often represented as a child dressed in a bishop's garb.¹⁶ The child – and it is a child, not an adult, as the saint was – does not act out the saint's life; he merely represents him. This transformation of the saint may have occurred because the date of his martyrdom, 29 December, is close to the festal dates of the saints who figured so largely in boy bishop ceremonies and clerics' revels – Holy Innocents (28 December) and St Stephen (26 December).¹⁷ There is a long history of bishops' attempts to suppress or control the indecorous activities of young clerics during this period.¹⁸ Lay use of the boy bishop, whether St Nicholas or St Thomas, may have arisen as a response to clerical attempts to suppress folk customs such as plough plays. The riding of a parish boy bishop is like both clerical and folk ceremonials insofar as the boy collects money from those he encounters. This feature of the practice has nothing to do with the lives of Nicholas or Thomas.

Although Becket's assassination is often depicted in various media, his frequent representation as a boy bishop may tell us something about why there are so few saint plays. We know that people in the Middle Ages were told the stories of the saints in sermons, narratives, and in other ways, but the fact remains that these stories were rarely portrayed in any extensive way in painting, sculpture, or stained glass windows.¹⁹ The more common representation

of a saint graphically was as a figure holding a symbol associated with the saint's life or martyrdom and with emblems – a crown, a halo – marking the saint's sanctity. It is not the saint's martyrdom that is so important; it is his or her immediate presence, whether in relics or images. We have numerous records of the carrying of both relics and images in procession, a ritual attempt at gaining the protection of the saint for another year.²⁰ It may be that the image is more important than the story of the saint. The saint's physical agony, whether related in narrative or symbolized visually, testifies to his or her superhuman endurance and devotion, but it is not necessary per se to the salvation or safety of the supplicant and the supplicant is not expected to imitate the life of the saint. Thus, there is little pressure to enact the story of the saint whereas there is much at stake in the representation of providential history and Christ's sacrifice for mankind.

Lawrence Clopper

Notes

- 1 'Communitas: The Play of Saints in Late Medieval and Tudor England', in *Medieval and Early Renaissance Drama: Reconsiderations*, Martin Stevens and Milla Riggio (eds), for a special issue of *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995 for 1992), 81–110. I will publish a revised list and account of saint plays in my forthcoming book, *Drama, Play and Game: Festive Culture in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period*.
- 2 For example, at the reception of Edward IV at Bristol, there was a St George over Temple Gate who fought with a dragon. Mark Pilkinton (ed), *Bristol, REED* (Toronto, 1997), 8.
- 3 See the essays by Clifford Davidson and Sally-Beth MacLean in this issue for differing interpretations of the records. Also, see Davidson's website of saint plays and pageants: <<http://www/wmich.edu/medieval/research/edam/saint.html>>. Davidson's list is broader than my Appendix; it includes the appearances of saints in ceremonies and processions as well as in dramas.
- 4 H.F. Westlake, *The Parish Gilds of Mediaeval England* (London, 1919), Appendix, 137–238; Caroline M. Barron and Laura Wright, 'The London Middle English Guild Certificates of 1388–9', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 39 (1995), 108–45.
- 5 I base my statement on an examination of the records of London deposited at the Records of Early English Drama project. Saints are frequently represented in pageants, but of the London ones Jean Robertson and D.J. Gordon say there is little indication that the pageants even included speeches (A

- Calendar of Dramatic Records in the Books of the Livery Companies of London, 1485–1640*, Malone Society Collections 3 (Oxford, 1954), xxi–xxii).
- 6 *Records of Plays and Players in Norfolk and Suffolk, 1330–1642*, David Galloway and John Wasson (eds), Malone Society Collections 11 (Oxford, 1980/1); and *Records of Plays and Players in Kent, 1450–1642*, Giles Dawson (ed), Malone Society Collections 7 (Oxford, 1965). I have also consulted James Gibson's more extensive transcriptions of Kent records at the office of the Records of Early English Drama and John Coldewey's of Essex (in his possession).
 - 7 Hansjürgen Linke, 'Germany and German-speaking Central Europe', in *The Theatre of Medieval Europe: New Research in Early Drama* Ekehard Simon (ed) (Cambridge, 1991), 209; and 'A Survey of Medieval Drama and Theater in Germany', in *Medieval Drama on the Continent of Europe*, Clifford Davidson and John H. Stroupe (eds) (Kalamazoo, MI, 1993), 30. In the first essay Linke says there are five texts of martyred saints, but he includes more in the second essay along with references in the records from Bernd Neumann, *Geistliches Schauspiel im Zeugnis der Zeit: Zur Aufführung mittelalterlicher religiöser Dramen im deutschen Sprachgebiet*, 2 vols (Munich, 1987). Even the expanded list does not suggest the genre was a major category in German religious drama. In addition, some entries in Neumann are records of saints in processions and the like, not dramas.
 - 8 Elsa Strietman, 'The Low Countries', in *Theatre of Medieval Europe*, Ekehard Simon (ed), 225–52. For more detail, see Wim M.H. Hummelen, *Repertorium van het Rederijkersdrama, ca. 1620* (Assen, 1968), and Hans van Dijk, Wim Hummelen, et al, 'A Survey of Dutch Drama Before the Renaissance', *Dutch Crossing* 22 (1984), 97–131.
 - 9 Lynette Muir, 'The Saint Play in Medieval France', in *The Saint Play in Medieval Europe*, Clifford Davidson (ed), Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 8 (Kalamazoo, MI, 1986), 123–80. See also Alan E. Knight, 'France', in *Theatre of Medieval Europe*, Ekehard Simon (ed), 162–3. Muir notes that about half of the extant saint plays are miracles of the Virgin and that many of the others are plays about local saints. Neither of these has much of a tradition in England.
 - 10 See the chapters on Italy and Spain by Sandro Sticca and Ronald E. Surtz, respectively, in *Theatre of Medieval Europe*, Ekehard Simon (ed), 169–206; and Kathleen Falvey, 'Early Italian Dramatic Traditions and Comforting Rituals: Some Initial Considerations', in *Crossing the Boundaries: Christian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities*, Konrad Eisenbichler (ed), EDAM Series 15 (Kalamazoo, MI, 1991), 33–55.
 - 11 There are exceptions, but again these are mostly from France.

- 12 The English Crucifixion plays, for example, and see Rainer Warning's description of a German play in 'On the Alterity of Medieval Religious Drama', *New Literary History* 10 (1979), 265–92; and Jody Enders' *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence* (Ithaca, 1999).
- 13 Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven, 1992), 171–4, based on his earlier "Holy Maydens, Holy Wyfes": The Cult of Women Saints in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century England', *Studies in Church History* 23 (1990), 175–96. Duffy is not trying to suggest that there were not representations of male saints; rather, he uses this case, as do I, to inquire into the nature of late medieval veneration of the saints.
- 14 Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 155–83. I am not trying to deny that people did not respond to saints as agents of salvation, but a prayer for intercession is more likely to be made to remedy an immediate crisis.
- 15 The martyrdom is reported in texts such as the *South English Legendary*, so the story is not unknown, just little represented.
- 16 At Canterbury a pageant transported by four knights contained an effigy of the saint (*Records of Plays and Players in Kent, 1450–1642*, Giles E. Dawson (ed), 188–98). E.K. Chambers gives a description of the boy bishop ceremonies of Europe in *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol 1 (Oxford, 1903), 336–71.
- 17 The feast of St Nicholas, the third date, is 6 December.
- 18 See Chambers and my essay, 'Miracula and the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*', *Speculum* 65 (1990), 878–905.
- 19 I base this judgment on personal experience and a reading of the EDAM surveys of the art of Chester, York, Warwickshire, and the West Riding of Yorkshire. Clifford Davidson was kind enough to confirm that narratives are rare, though they do exist (eg, St Catherine in a wall painting at Pickering, N. Yorkshire; St Nicholas in the bosses at Norwich Cathedral). He also suggested we keep in mind that many objects were destroyed, so the record is incomplete.
- 20 In John Wasson (ed), *Devon*, REED (Toronto, 1986), there are numerous records of the carrying of tabernacles, probably shrines with a saint's image inside. At Beverley the chief ceremonial expression of the guilds' public and social functions took place on Rogation Monday when the shrine of St John of Beverley was processed from the Minster to St Mary's. The assessment is Diana Wyatt's. I have drawn on her dissertation, deposited at the office of the Records of Early English Drama. See also *Beverley Town Documents*, Arthur F. Leach (ed), *Selden Society* 14 (1900), 33–101; and Arthur F. Leach, 'Some English Plays and Players, 1220–1548', in *An English Miscellany Presented to Dr. Furnivall in Honour of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* (Oxford, 1901), 206–22; and Alan Nelson, *Medieval English Stage* (Chicago, 1974), 88–99.

Response

The question asked in the title is: 'Why are there so few saint plays?' The assumption is that there were only a few, but we cannot be sure that this was the case. Only about 10 per cent of the records are extant, with a real weakness in parish records (as a quick look at Lawrence Blair's *List of Churchwardens' Accounts* indicates), and hence it is risky to make sweeping judgments, especially since there is every indication that saints were popular in visual display of various kinds, including pageants, processions, and, apparently, plays. It will not serve very well to deny the designation of 'saint play' in all instances for which the texts and records fail to make their nature clear. Such a practice is not applied to references to biblical plays when the texts are not extant (and the number of these cited in the records is also relatively small). Further, the hypothesis that some kind of saint 'game' was involved – for example, in cases like the St Christian play in the Little Park outside Coventry in 1505 – would demand that we have specific evidence for such communal recreations. To be sure, we are dealing with flexible terminology but I would not want to be guilty of bending such terminology all in one way to fit the pre-conceived notion that 'there [were] so few saint plays'.

In the traditional religion of the late Middle Ages, saints were a continual presence both visually and through their relics, which were deposited in every church in England. Living in the past, they nevertheless were understood to be available in the present and in the hour of one's death – and to be seen in glory by those admitted to bliss. They were made visible in sculpture, wood carvings, wall paintings, glass paintings, and illuminated manuscripts. Images of them in these media were devotional, in which case they were venerated and had candles placed before them, or they were mnemonic, focusing commonly on the cause of martyrdom. The moment of the saint's martyrdom was inherently dramatic, since it generally contained within itself the story most relevant to his or her function as a mediator among mortals. We have every reason to believe that in England as in France saint plays, though not necessarily on the scale of the Digby Mary Magdalene or even the Conversion of St. Paul from the same manuscript, were a popular genre. Exactly how popular we may never know.

Clifford Davidson

Review of 'The Theatre of Saints', Sessions 1209 and 1309, International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds, 12–15 July 1999

The recent International Medieval Congress at Leeds (12–15 July 1999) focused this year on 'Saints'. There were accordingly a number of papers and sessions devoted to the saints in early drama. This review is principally of the sessions on 'The Theatre of Saints', although other papers and discussions will be mentioned as they are important in light of the current debate on when and whether we can be sure that a 'saint play' was in fact a dramatic performance. Professor Clopper has argued above that there is very little evidence of 'ludus', or even 'miracula', being a play in the sense of scripted drama. In a paper on 'The Problem of the Clerkenwell Plays' (Session 809) he showed how seemingly cumulative chronicle evidence of a cycle could in fact be confused and confusing in its dating and descriptions, and argued that the chroniclers were probably referring to an extraordinary event, possibly on a much smaller scale than the 'cycle' assumed by earlier scholars.

An awareness of Professor Clopper's caveats ran through the discussions of many of the papers, although this is nothing new. It is in the nature of early drama discussions that for every person who raises a hypothesis, two others will raise caveats. This constant questioning of the evidence is vital in light of the very sparse information which that evidence conveys. It was therefore something of a relief for the audience of Jane Cowling's paper on 'A Fifteenth-Century Saint's Play at Winchester: Some Problems of Interpretation' (Session 609) that the play record of St Agnes at Winchester in 1409 indicates at least a script, a playing-cloth, and a partial cast list. Here, at least, was a text (or had been a text) and therefore (surely?) there had been a play. Whether it was actually performed is another question, and one which the evidence does not answer.

Sue Wilson's paper on 'Miracles, Drama, and St John of Beverley' (Session 1109) reminded us that a clearly dramatic performance (with words and actions, and evidently in the vernacular) was happening in Beverley in the late eleventh century. Her paper pointed out some of the parallels between the miracle which occurred and the performance of the resurrection play, and the way in which the author 'dramatizes' his material for the reader.

In the first session on 'The Theatre of Saints' (Session 1209), James Stokes, in 'Saints Plays from Lincolnshire: What the Records Tell Us', gave us some new information from Donnington and Spalding of plays of Nebuchadnezzar and the Three Children and of St Michael and the Dragon. Parish plays, he argued, were not invariably or inevitably rough and rustic.

Citing the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* and wall paintings in Friskney, he argued that the plays had less to do with local saints and more to do with central doctrines and personal spiritual transformation. The discussion of this paper again raised issues of what type of performance is being recorded.

Sam Riches, approaching the topic from the point of view of an art historian in 'Ritual in Civic Saint Cults: The "Riding of St George" in Late Medieval England' discussed the survival of St George ridings into the Reformation and the importance of the guilds of St George in fostering these celebrations, noting especially the higher social level of the members of these guilds. A cautionary note was sounded in the question period, as some of the evidence is from Mary's reign, and may represent revival rather than continuity. Sydney Higgins, in 'The Life of St Meriasek: A Cornish Drama', offered a discussion of 'the only non-biblical saint play in England to survive'. As much of the play does not deal with St Meriasek, he raised the possibility that a 'dull' local saint's life could be enlivened by episodes from a more exciting saint, and that it might be possible for the play to be tailored to different locations. He stressed that although the ninety-nine speaking parts could be played by fifteen players, the crowd scenes seem to be important, and it would appear that this was a play which involved and was watched by the whole community.

The second session on 'The Theatre of Saints' (Session 1309) had only two papers, by Marla Carlson and Graham Runnalls. Marla Carlson, in 'Spectacular Suffering: Erotic Response and the Saint's Play', was responding to a paper given at the 1998 *SIEM* Colloquium by Bob Potter. Using pictures from the Hours of Etienne Chevalier, she discussed the portrayal of martyrdom, particularly of female virgin martyrs, in terms of the supposed possible audience responses. She identified three possible responses: objectifying, identifying, and dialogic. The discussion following the paper raised several other possibilities, and the necessity of being very clear in the definition of the terminology was stressed both in the paper and in the discussion, as many of the concepts and terms used are post-medieval constructs.

Graham Runnalls ('Fiacre and Veronica: Two Saints, Two Printed Plays, and One Parisian Confraternity') presented his findings on the plays, published together in 1529, of St Fiacre and St Venise, an 'odd couple', with the added oddity of an unusual form of the name Veronica. He revealed that these saints were the patrons of the Paris *confrerie* of master gardeners, who also use the 'Venise' form of Veronica, and argued that in all probability the plays were commissioned by this group.

The issue of whether the evidence for England really suggests that saint

plays were a common feature was not, of course, resolved. What was clear from the discussions was that an interplay of speculation and caution, of imaginative response to, and rigorous questioning of, the evidence, is vital to the forwarding of our understanding of the remaining fragments of the 'Theatre of Saints'.

Elizabeth M.S. Baldwin