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. 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, 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'. 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. 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. In France, across the Channel, more than a hundred play texts of saint plays survive, 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. 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. 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, 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). 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'. 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 heights of which gunpowder was in use in the fourteenth century.
issues 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'.

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. 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 Gloucester), 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'? 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') 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' — 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.

The Shrewsbury SS Feliciana 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 Feliciana and Sabina describes a ‘play’, ‘show’, and ‘martyrdom’, and specifically notes that it was presented ‘for the honour of the said town’. The ‘players of the same martyrdom’ received ten shillings. 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. 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. 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), 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 head from which a saint was played or marched. The earlier records note that the scene, believed to be of the Virgin Mary for episodic miracles and fragments of manuscripts, had been stored for four years as ideal for use and chosen for it is a thing of scarcity.
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. 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. 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, 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, but one of the plays stitched into the N-town manuscript is verifiably a Mary play that dramatizes her early legendary life. 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. 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 our Ladye ... played at the abbey gates'. 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. 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 ‘pe Wyfus of pe town’. 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, 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. Whether the martyrdom plays were fully scripted or orally transmitted, 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’. 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 James 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. 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'.

Clifford Davidson

Notes


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*.


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 Basingbourn 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.


12 Young, ‘Plays and Players’, pt. 1, 57. To be sure, there is still considerable
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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).

Audrey Douglas and Peter Greenfield (eds), Cumberland/Westmorland/
Gloucestershire, reed (Toronto, 1986), 290, 388.

Douglas and Greenfield, Cumberland, 422.

Karl Young, The Drama of the Medieval Church, 2 vols (Oxford, 1933), 2.338,
344.

A Chronicle of London from 1089 to 1483, Edward Tyrell and Nicholas H.


Ingram, Coventry, 100, 128.

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).

‘Et in Regardo dato lusoribus eiusdem Martirij tunc temporis hoc anno x s.’
(Somerset, Shropshire, 1.172). Clopper suggests (‘Communia’, 88) that ‘lusores’
‘could mean either musicians or gamesmen’. Young notes that the most com-
mon meaning was ‘player’, but could also refer to a player ‘in a mixed musical

Somerset, Shropshire, 1.183–4.

Churchwardens’ Accounts at Betrysden, 1515–1573, Francis R. Mercer (ed),

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 Reassess-
mant of the Date and Provenance of the Cornish Ordinalia’, Comparative

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.

Dawson, Records of Plays, 192–8.

A Calendar of Dramatic Records in the Books of the Livery Companies of London,
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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.


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.


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. Mepham, '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 A