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. 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. 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.

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. 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 (read-
ings of the Passion or Palm Sunday prophets, for example) but no saint
plays.\(^4\) 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.\(^4\) Again, it is not that
we do not have some fairly extensive records of town expenditure on cere-
mony 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. Ger-
many, 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 ex-
ceptions, 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 ra-
sonale 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, Helen, that
women...
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.  

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. 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. The 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). There is a long history of bishops' attempts to suppress or control the indecorous activities of young clerics during this period. 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 ceremonies 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. 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


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.


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

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 Hansjurgen 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 Auffuhrung 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.


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.


11 There are exceptions, but again these are mostly from France.

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.


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.