English 'dramatic' performances at the council of Constance, 1417

The occasion of the fifteenth-century council of Constance was duly noted by Ulrich von Richental, a prominent citizen and city clerk of Constance. In attendance, in addition to the continental nobility who included the court of the emperor Sigismund, were lords temporal and spiritual from England. The latter are described by von Richental as having presented for the other participants at the council on 24 and 31 January, 1416/7, magnificent feasts in the house of Walter Burkart, next door to Richental's own house. The lavish feasts were punctuated by 'bild und gebard' (i.e., picture and gesture) of biblical events suitable to the Christmas season and of those from the life of the Virgin Mary. Whether these performances were 'shows' (i.e., pantomimes) or spoken or sung drama is not possible to determine from Richental's description of them, but their subjects — the Nativity, the Three Kings, the Slaughter of the Innocents, scenes from Mary's life — are ones common to vernacular and Latin religious drama.

Following are extracts from and paraphrases of the section in von Richental's account that deals with the performances. They are drawn from the Constance manuscript as edited by Feger, with additional material from other manuscript and early printed sources indicated by square brackets.

... am xxiij tag des monatz January, do luden der ertzbischoff Salisburg-ensis, der bischoff von Lundurs und dannobt fiinff bischoff von Engelland all rät ze Costentz und sust vil erber burger inurchart Wahers buss....

On 24 January, the archbishop of Salisbury, the bishop of London and five other English bishops invited all members of the council in Constance and certain honest citizens to Walter Burkart's house.

... und gaben in vast ain costlich mal, ye druw gericht [or trachten⁴] nach-ainander, yedes gericht besunder mit acht essen....

They gave a very costly banquet, with three meals, and each meal comprised eight courses. Each dish was presented only once, on four gold- and four silver-plated services.

... In dem mal zwüschtent den essen do machten sy solich bild und gebard, als unser frow ir kind, unsern beren und och got, gebar, mit vast kostlichen tüchern und gewand....

Between the meals they represented the Nativity, in very rich drapes and robes. Literally, 'they made images and gestures, such as Our Lady who bore her child, our Lord and God.'

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... Und Josephen stalten sy zu ir, und die baiigen dry küng, als die
unser frowen und ir kind ir opffer brachten. Und hatten gemacht einen
luter guldinen sterne, der gieng vor inen an einem clainen ysin trat....
And they placed Joseph near her, and the three holy Kings as they
brought their offering to Our Lady, and her child. And they made a star
of pure gold which moved along before them on a small iron wire.

... Und machten küng Herodes, wie er den dry baiigen küngen nachsant,
und wie er die kindli ertot....
And they depicted how King Herod sent his men after the three holy
kings and how he killed the children.

... Das machten sy alles mit gar kostlichen gewand und mit grosen guld-
inen und silbrinen gürteln. Und machten das mit groser geziert und de-
müttikait....
They presented all this in very precious vestments and with large gold
and silver belts. They did it with great decorum and humility.

These performances must have been successful, for they were repeated for the
emperor Sigismund and his lords, who had arrived in Constance that week, on
the following Sunday, 31 January.

... Am sonntag vor der liechtmess, do, luden aber die Engelschen
bischof unsern herren den Römschen küng und vil weltlic fürsten
und [die grossen berren, und in sonder hertzog Ludwigen von Payern
und burgrauaff Friidriche von Nürenberg, und ettlach ander graufen3]
und niin bischoff und ettlach audiutorese ze tisch, als das davor geschriiben
stat, in das selb buss, und so vil edler berren....
On the Sunday before Candlemas, the English bishops held another
feast, like the one recounted above, in the same house. This time the
Roman king and many princes and great lords, especially Louis of
Bavaria and Frederick of Nuremburg, nine bishops, and many
‘audiutorei6 were invited.

... das ob der berren tisch sassen zweu und fiunfzig und hundert
berren. Und gabent inen aber drüw essen, jeglichs mit acht gerichten,
ouched übergult und übersilbert, vil costlicher dann vor....
152 noble lords were at the feast, which was given again in three
meals, each with eight courses and gold- and silver-plated services,
much more expensive than the first time.

... Und zwüschen den essen, do tribent sy aber von unser frowen, wie
vor stat, [von den dry güngen, von Herodes, und vast vil kostlicher
dann vor7]....
And between the meals they presented scenes of the life of Our
Lady, just as previously described of the three kings and Herod, but
in a much more costly way.
Further research may reveal the nature of these performances; they give a glimpse of courtly entertainment, perhaps dramatic, that combines secular and sacred in an intriguing fashion.

NOTES

2 Cf 1, 22, 179 (section 77 n.3), 218 (section 200, n.1).
3 Facsimile volume, fols. 69 and 69v; Feger's transcription, pp 218-19, sections 200 and 202. I have also used the incunable Das Concilium so zu Constanze, 1536, which is absent from Feger's list, the Aulendorf-New York version, the M.R. Buck version of 1882, the Berchem edition of 1932, and Kup's Richental's Chronicle of the Council of Constance (1936). Cf Feger's bibliography, I, 287-8.
4 Das Concilium (1536), fol CXL and CXLv.
5 Buck, 99.
6 According to Feger, an 'auditor' is a judge at the pontifical court (281).
7 Feger, 219 (section 202, n.2).