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Excerpt
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Eleventh-century plays

I *Sponsus* *The Bridegroom, from Limoges*

Style, meaning and structure

The *Sponsus*, composed probably *c.* 1050/60, is a decade or two older than the Freising *Officium stelle*, and some three decades older than the Nicolas plays from Hildesheim. Thus within the space of one generation we can observe original dramatic achievement of very diverse kinds in diverse regions – southern France, Bavaria, and Saxony. In the general introduction (pp. xx–xxii) I have tried to give a first impression of the human and symbolic vision of the *Sponsus* dramatist; this will be complemented here by some more detailed indications concerning style, meaning and structure in his play.

The prevalent scholarly opinion, of which the most distinguished exponent is D'Arco Silvio Avalle,¹ is that the vernacular parts of the *Sponsus* were composed later than the Latin ones – that they were added by another hand to the original, wholly Latin, text, as 'glosses' for the benefit of the unlearned in the audience. I know of no concrete evidence in support of this view, and should like to outline briefly an interpretation that, if valid, would support the contrary – that this play shows a fully unified imaginative conception, elaborated bilingually by a single author (naturally for the sake of an audience, or congregation, that included unlearned people as well as learned).

The five opening strophes (1–10) lack a rubric in the manuscript; but their wording shows that they must be sung by a human protagonist (not, as some have thought, by Angel Gabriel) – most probably by the personified Ecclesia, speaking to as well as for humanity. At the very start of her song comes one of the few moments of explicit allegory in the play: the bridegroom of the gospel parable (Matthew 25, 1–13) is identified with Christ. The command *vigilate* (1), with which the parable closes and which directly follows here, reminds that he who comes as loving bridegroom will also come as judge at the end of time. Similar commands to keep watch (*Videte, vigilate et orate ... Vigilate ergo ...*

¹ *Sponsus*, ed. D'A. S. Avalle (with Italian translation), music ed. R. Monterosso (Milan–Naples 1965).

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Vigilate) run refrainlike through the passages in which Christ warns of the world's imminent end in Mark (13, 33–7) and Luke (12, 35–40).

Yet in their primary meaning these strophes evoke a joyous advent, not the final, terrifying one. Christ is coming as (in Paul's phrase) the second Adam, the liberator who by his harrowing of hell undoes the harm that the first Adam caused. The moment being celebrated and re-enacted is that of the Easter vigil: the crucifixion and redemption have just been accomplished, and the freeing of hell's captives, by the loving divine bridegroom of human souls, is about to occur.

The transition to the plot of the parable, in the vernacular strophes of Gabriel that now follow (11–27), is a subtle one, though the defective rubric (*Prudentes*, nothing more) makes what happens somewhat difficult to grasp. Ecclesia's message had been addressed to all the maidens – emblematically we could say, to every soul. They can either heed or ignore her: they can alertly welcome the liberating bridegroom, like the biblical ancestors in the harrowing, or else sleepily fail to respond to his arrival. As Avale valuably noted, already St Jerome indicated an interpretation of the parable in Matthew along these lines, seeing the ten maidens as exemplifying 'solicitous and sluggish human beings: some are always watching for the Lord's coming, others, surrendering to sleep and to inertia, do not think the judgement will take place'.²

Though there is no rubric to inform us, the text implies that in the course of Ecclesia's strophes, or else between hers and Gabriel's, the Foolish Virgins have mimed their surrender to sleep and to inertia; thus when Gabriel sings he is left addressing the Wise Virgins only. This is one of the playwright's significant departures from the gospel text, where all ten Virgins fall asleep (Matthew 25, 5); that here only the Foolish do so is strongly suggested not only by the play-text but also by an explicit instruction at this point in the medieval German dramatisation of the parable: 'Then let all the Foolish have a feast, lie down, and fall asleep.'³ The culpable sleepiness of these maidens – in effect, their torpid indifference to the message of the redemption – has another consequence of which the gospel text knows nothing: there they had not thought to take oil with them in order to greet the bridegroom; here in the play they come provided with oil, but spill it negligently – in their drowsiness, that is, they must handle or set down their lamps so carelessly that these topple over. This is a visual dramatic invention comparable to that of the artists who, in fourth-century catacomb

² Avale p. 18; Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum* II, PL 23, 322.

³ *Das Eisenacher Zehnjungfrauenspiel* 116c, ed. M. Curschmann, I. Glier, *Deutsche Dichtung des Mittelalters* III (Munich 1981) 274–306, at p. 281.

paintings, depicted the Foolish Virgins holding overturned, extinguished lamps: these are ways of *showing* that the lamps are empty, more vivid than the simple forgetting to bring oil implied by the prose narrative.

There is, to my knowledge, no tradition of Gabriel addressing the Wise Virgins: this may be a contribution of the playwright's own, enriching his symbolic contexture. Gabriel is first and foremost the angel of the annunciation to Mary, and Mary, often identified with the beloved in the Song of Songs, is the celestial bride *par excellence*. All the maidens can, like her, become the loved consorts of the divine bridegroom, and Gabriel's declaration to them re-enacts that first annunciation. It should be noted that with his strophes the play has reached a later moment in time: Gabriel, like Ecclesia, alludes to events of Christ's life and death, but in his discourse the harrowing is already over, 'And he has risen! Scripture affirms it' (24). Gabriel concludes by warning that the second coming is near. His vernacular refrain – 'Don't fall asleep!' – is the counterpart to the eschatological *Vigilate* of the gospels.

After Gabriel's strophes, the Foolish Virgins wake up again, and notice that their lamps had capsized while they were sleeping (28ff.). They realise that, bereft of light, they will be unworthy to greet the bridegroom. There are many allegorical and moral interpretations of the oil they lack and for which they now ask their sisters⁴ – but the playwright does not dwell on these; he concentrates wholly on the maidens' remorse and anxious pleas for help. The only hints of allegorical meaning in their strophes are 'this journey' (32) – which is both the bridal wake and the course of earthly life – and 'the place on high' (36) – both the 'high table' of the wedding-feast and the court of heaven. But what dominates the strophes of the Foolish Virgins is their vernacular refrain, *Dolentas, chaitivas, trop i avem dormit!* – one of the most haunting lines in all Provençal poetry – in which they express their never-ceasing self-accusation and naked despair.

Their wise sisters answer (43ff.), refusing them with a scornfulness that has no counterpart in the gospel narrative. Their tone and attitude cannot, in my view, be accounted for in terms of theology or allegories: it is a human and dramatic aporia. At most, we can relate it to Christ's frightening predictions that, as the end of the world draws near, 'A brother will deliver his brother to be killed, and a father his son, and children will rise up against their parents and afflict them with death . . . but whoever endures to the end will be saved' (Mark 13, 12–13). In the

⁴ Cf. Dronke 1986, pp. xx–xxiii.

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moments before the second coming, that is, it is everyone for himself. Yet this playwright gives full emotional weight to the vulnerable victims, and shows the ugliness of the well-provided, who can 'endure to the end'. At the same time he faces the harshness of the parable without extenuation: he dwells on it unflinchingly, or even heightens it, establishing a keen tension between the human perspective and the divine. He lets the Foolish Virgins show a contrition and repentance for their negligence (54–6) that has no equivalent in the gospel, and that, if it were thought through in theological terms, would ensure their pardon. He then gives an even more contemptuous vernacular strophe to the Wise Virgins (63–5), who, as they see their sisters making their way to the Merchants, are determined to be rid of these importunate siblings once and for all.

The Merchants, who are barely mentioned in the parable, are presented with sympathy and deftly characterised by their speech. Their vernacular strophes carry the action forward (note that there is no Latin here which they could conceivably be 'glossing'). They are courteous and concerned, but recognise that they cannot help these maidens. Once more there is an elusive hint of allegory: speaking perhaps more wisely than they know, the Merchants tell that it is a divine, not human, aid which their customers need (67–70). Yet they are optimistic, and believe that this divine aid can be mediated by sisterly love, if they beseech their sisters once more 'in God's glorious name' (72). The Merchants' two utterances, taken together, suggest that here the dramatist is playing upon the well-known Patristic interpretation of the lamp-oil as the oil of charity. But the Foolish Virgins realise it is hopeless to beg yet again (75–9); their sense of doom is implicitly an indictment of the wise sisters, who – the Merchants are sure – could help them, but who will not. The dramatist here stretches the tension between the unfolding of human character and the inexorable unfolding of the parable to the limit.

In the dénouement, the transformation of loving bridegroom into pitiless judge is complete. The poetic language brings this out in a remarkable way. When the Foolish Virgins implore, 'let the gate be opened for us' (81), and are turned away by Christ, the wording suggests a dramatic reversal of the moment in the Song of Songs (5, 6) when the bride says:

I opened the latch of my gate for my beloved,
 but he had turned away and gone past.

I would suggest further that the dramatist recalled the bride's anguished words in her next verse (5, 7):

The guards who patrol the city found me,
 they struck me and wounded me . . .

and found there the hint for his own grim counterpart (which is not in the gospel) – the demons' seizing of the rejected Virgins. They, who began by ignoring the annunciation of the divine bridegroom, end by becoming the antitype of the divine bride.

Christ's Latin words, banishing them (83–4), are in the same metre as *Ecclesia's* at the opening, and were presumably sung to the same melody. In that opening Christ had been the joyously awaited *sponsus*; now he curses those who, through negligence or torpor, had not welcomed him then. His curse (85–7), in the vernacular, once more goes far beyond the gospel parable – it is freely improvised from Christ's threats about the judgement later in Matthew's chapter (25, 41): 'Depart from me, you accursed ones, into the eternal fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels.'

Here in the play devils appear on stage for the first time (as far as the extant records show) – not to languish in the fire themselves but to plunge the rejected maidens into it. If the performance took place in a church where, below the *aula* – the sanctuary that is an image of heaven – steps led down to the crypt, a lit brazier placed in the crypt could readily have evoked the eternal fire. But what of the original impact of this final moment, in which five maidens are hurled down? Did it bring the play to a fearsome, cathartic close, or bring relief from the dreadful final words by a visually grotesque, outrageous climax (comparable perhaps to that of *The Jew of Malta*), in which serious and comic aspects become inseparable? The dramatic texts and testimonies that survive from the eleventh century are too scant to provide a basis for a decision. Yet the nature of later vernacular dramatisations of this parable might speak for the second, serio-comic alternative.

The German play from Eisenach, composed around 1300, and the late medieval Dutch play are both on a much larger scale than the *Sponsus* (they comprise 576 and 812 verses respectively).⁵ While in the German play the spoken dialogues are framed by sung Latin responses, the Dutch is (except for one song) entirely in speech. In all three plays, the Foolish Virgins and not the Wise are dramatically in the foreground: in the *Sponsus* they are given seven strophes while the Wise have three, and the proportions in the later plays are even more striking: the longest scene in the German, the concluding one, consists wholly of the lamentations of the rejected Virgins (383–576); in the

⁵ For the German play, see note 3 above; the Dutch, *Het Spel van de V vroede ende van de V dwaeze Maegden*, is ed. by M. Hoebeke (2nd edn, The Hague 1979).

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Dutch, far the most elaborate scene is that of the Foolish Virgins' feast (83–308). It is artistically more exciting to depict vice than virtue, as William Blake well noted:

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.⁶

It is hardly too much to say that in the *Sponsus* the Foolish Virgins are not only the protagonists but the heroines: what the parable shows as the dread aspect of divine justice, the dramatist insists on showing also as a human tragedy, of five soft, helpless young women undone by 'the stamp of one defect'. He stands apart from the northern dramatists in that he does not moralise. They, by contrast, frankly present their plot as an *exemplum*, a cautionary tale – though the German also has moments of keen human poignancy. Yet it is noteworthy that, despite all the moralistic emphasis in the German and Dutch plays, the sins of the Foolish Virgins, on account of which they are condemned to hell's torment, are hardly more heinous than the oversleeping in the *Sponsus*. In the German, the first Virgin, sure that 'God does not want the sinner's death', and that there's time enough to appeal to his mercy later, summons her companions to play with ball and dominoes (*spelsteyne*): 'we want to take joy in our young life . . . we want to get away from these old churchmice' (78–88). They 'dance with great delight' (100a), and they have a banquet, after which they drowse off – nothing worse. In the Dutch play, where the five have become personified vices, the first, Time-Wasting, invites her sisters – Recklessness, Pride, Vainglory, and Tittle-Tattle – to a feast of waffles and spiced *clareyt* (206–7). Their antics (such as Pride's insistence on being shown reverence by the rest) are comic but never sinister. Is the moral of these plays, then, that if you take pleasure in being young, playing, dancing and feasting, you will be damned? I suspect that the Germanic authors too treated the parable subversively: like the Provençal dramatist's human tragedy, their cautionary tales could call official notions of theodicy in question. Is it conceivable that – as in the Eisenach play – Mary could intercede with Christ for such lighthearted sinners, but be refused? Or – as in the Dutch – that girls could be banished from heaven for enjoying waffles and *clareyt*? Such thoughts must have crossed the minds of the authors, not just of the marquis of Eisenach (see above, p. xxi).

In these later texts, the language used by the devils is hedged by

⁶ *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *ad init.*

ironies: in the German, when Christ condemns the Foolish Virgins, Beelzebub comments: 'Jesus is making a good speech in our play! I'll have the chains fetched...'; Lucifer then complains about sinners having to go to hell – if the devils need sulphur and pitch in order to torment them, they themselves must live with that stench (305–6, 315 ff.). In the Dutch play, the devils speak in a low, often comic, register, full of exclamatory and abusive outbursts, and of black humour: one demon, Quadenraet (Evil Counsel), says to the maidens: 'We'll teach you how to sing us little songs, to which we'll dance and leap up joyously!' (749 f.).

We cannot simply extrapolate from these later texts to the dramatic mode of treating the demons at the close of the *Sponsus*. Yet just as in the eleventh-century Freising play (II) Herod already has something of the 'fearsome-comic' aspect which Robert Weimann defined brilliantly in the context of later, vernacular Herod plays,⁷ it is at least possible that our earliest demons, like Herod, showed something of the ambiguous, apotropaic effect, the *furchtbare Komik*, on which later centuries relied in the dramatic portrayal of evil.

Language and versification

Avalle, in his detailed analysis of the language of the vernacular parts of the *Sponsus*, showed that the play was copied in the region of Limoges. He also showed that the Limousin copyist was transcribing a vernacular not of his own region but of southwestern France. This fact, along with the corruptness of the text as transmitted, does not in my view permit a *late* eleventh-century dating for the composition: if the oldest part of the Saint-Martial codex, which includes the *Sponsus*, was copied towards the end of the century, the play itself will probably have been composed a good generation earlier.

Avalle's musical collaborator, Raffaello Monterosso, allowed himself an unhappy comment on the play's language: for him the music is vastly superior to the text – the melodic phrases in their variety 'redeem the anonymous poet's colourless paraphrase of the gospel text from its generic inexpressiveness'.¹ The many departures from the gospel text signalled above hardly suggest a 'colourless paraphrase' – rather, a passionate, controversial rethinking of the biblical narrative. The expressiveness of the language deserves perhaps a further comment. I

⁷ *Shakespeare und die Tradition des Volkstheaters* (Berlin 1967), pp. 111–21.

¹ Avalle p. 120.

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believe the dramatist, while well-versed in Latin rhythmic composition, showed his most expressive artistry in his first language, in his vernacular lines. No one who has responded to the play is likely to forget its two compelling refrains: *Gaire no-i dormet! – Dolentas, chaitivas, trop i avem dormit!* A closer look at Gabriel's strophes (11–27) reveals their succinctness and force – how much the playwright can compress into these, with not a trace of didactic heaviness. The terse, irate vernacular strophe of the Prudentes (63–5), and the gentle solicitude revealed in the Merchants' strophes (67–74), vividly establish character by way of speech; the final curse of Christ (85–7) forms a true climax, of a savageness unmatched in the biblical Latin of the parable.

The author uses basically two verse-forms. Ecclesia (1–10) and Christ in his Latin words (83–4) are given couplets of the form 4p + 4p + 7pp, one of the types of rhythmic imitation of the classical trochaic *septenarius* (cf. Norberg p. 114). The remaining Latin strophes consist of verses of the type 4 + 6pp, which is first found in the refrains of late antique and Merovingian hymns (cf. Norberg p. 152). Strophes composed wholly of 4 + 6pp verses, with or without refrain, appear to become widespread only in the eleventh century, and those in the *Sponsus* may be among the earliest extant. Avalle (p. 47) observes that the conjunction of strophes of 4p + 4p + 7pp lines with a refrain that is 4 + 6pp can be found in a famous late antique hymn on the day of judgement, *Apparebit / repentina / dies magna domini* ('Suddenly will appear the great day of the Lord'), which has the refrain *In tremendo / die iudicii* ('On the dread judgement-day'), and that it may well have been this hymn that prompted the dramatist's choice of his two measures for a play with an eschatological theme.

The vernacular verses are generally in the form 4 + 6: that is, they are a counterpart to the Latin 4 + 6pp lines, but without their heavier paroxytone stress near the close. There are also some irregularities: the first half of the Provençal line may have five syllables (cf. 13, 16) or three (cf. 87), the second half may have seven (cf. 85–7). Gabriel's refrain has six syllables,² that of the Fatue has twelve (6 + 6).

The strophic use of 4 + 6pp verses is seen again in Hildesheim (III–IV) and Vic (v), and once more, briefly, in the *Carmina Burana* Passion-play (ix). In the Eisenach play of the ten maidens come some Latin lines (168a) which the editors print as prose, as if they were one of the liturgical responsories, but which in fact form a non-liturgical strophe,

² It seems a little strained to call Gabriel's strophes 'pseudo-Sapphic' (Avalle p. 48), particularly since one of these strophes has four verses, not three, before the refrain.

closely related by its wording and refrain to those from Vic (see below p. 92). The second Foolish Virgin sings:

Sed eamus oleum emere,
 preter quod nil possumus agere.
 Qui caret hoc, carebit glorie.

And the others reply with the refrain:

*Heu, quantus est noster dolor!*³

As Latin strophes are not found elsewhere in the Eisenach play, this one has probably been incorporated from another, earlier Latin play of the ten maidens which has not survived (or perhaps, has not yet been traced in MSS).

The manuscript

The manuscript which today is Paris Bibliothèque Nationale lat. 1139 consists of several originally separate collections of liturgical and paraliturgical compositions. These were assembled at Saint-Martial de Limoges, and belonged to the abbey at least from 1265. The oldest part of the codex was written in the last years of the eleventh century (thus Guy de Poerck,¹ and Charles Samaran, cited by Avalle pp. 10 f.). It consists of two sections, written by two distinct principal hands. Fols. 32r–79v contain verses, tropes, and plays, fols. 80r–118r chiefly sequences and Kyries. Over the great majority of the texts there is Aquitanian neumatic notation. Apart from the *Sponsus*, there is a brief play of the Innocents on fols. 32v–33r, and the earliest extant play of the Prophets on fols. 55v–58r.

The fullest descriptive account of the contents of the manuscript is still that of Spanke (1931).² In the section fols. 32r–79v, in which one unsigned fascicule, a kind of appendix, has been displaced,³ the language of the vernacular compositions (which include the Annunciation-lyric with dialogue, *Mei amic e mei fiel* – see above, p. xxi)

³ 'But let us go to buy the oil – there's nothing else we can do. Whoever lacks this oil will lack (heaven's) glory. *Alas, how great is our grief!*' Similarly at 236a there comes a clearly non-liturgical Latin rhyming quatrain (though *regni* in the fourth verse is hypermetric), that presumably likewise stems from the lost Latin play of the ten maidens postulated above.

¹ *Scriptorium* 23 (1969) 298–312 (the best codicological study of the MS).

² 'St Martial-Studien I', repr. in Hans Spanke, *Studien zur lateinischen und romanischen Lyrik des Mittelalters* (Hildesheim 1983), at pp. 6–23.

³ Cf. Sarah Fuller, *Musica Disciplina* 33 (1979) 7–10.