

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82756-0 - Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy

Lynette R. Muir

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: staging the stories*

FROM SACRED DRAMA TO SECULAR PLAY

The plays discussed in this companion volume to *The biblical drama of medieval Europe* are based on many kinds of serious stories from medieval sources: saints' lives and miracles, romances, epics and historical events from the siege of Troy to the Hundred Years War. The only biblical plays included are a few from Lille on the victories of Joshua, not previously available.¹ Polemical and morality plays are limited to examples relevant to the stories being discussed, and I have excluded (with a few exceptions) plays of situation rather than story, especially farces and Shrovetide plays.

What then is left after these omissions? The answer is a very substantial body of serious medieval plays on love and war, especially in French and Italian, with smaller but still significant collections in Spanish, German, English and Dutch. The varying amounts of medieval drama surviving from different countries has been vividly described by Peter Meredith: 'Where French language drama has hundreds of thousands of lines of texts (much still unedited) . . . England has a handful, an armful, perhaps a scaffold load.'² An imbalance in the number of references to the different language groups when discussing the stories is therefore inevitable but no attempt has been made to measure the relative quality of the plays – that is a task for the reader.

In a recently published article, Graham Runnalls, the acknowledged expert on medieval French play texts, has made it quite clear that to suggest that French medieval drama stops around 1500 is 'frankly absurd'.³ Runnalls is referring here not only to religious drama, both biblical and hagiographic, but to the whole range of plays from miracles to farces. I have therefore taken the year 1550 as the end of half a millennium of medieval plays, and the beginning of the first century or so of retellings

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82756-0 - Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy

Lynette R. Muir

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of these stories on both amateur and professional stages, which I have called the ‘legacy’.⁴

SUBJECT MATTER AND THE PLAYS

In *Aspects of genre*, a study of the characteristics of late medieval French drama, Alan Knight distinguished between the serious plays which were historical and therefore based on true stories, and the comedies and farces which were fiction.⁵ Among the serious group he lists the Bible, saints’ lives and profane history such as the fall of Troy. Plays are also based on the narrative epics and romances. The plays discussed in this volume cover a wide range of subjects and forms but all belong to this ‘serious’ drama. They also include a genre principally found in earlier centuries: the miracle play, whose stories must also by definition be history, though as will appear they do not necessarily fit into any of Knight’s categories. In contrast to the biblical drama whose source is indisputable, these plays have a variety of backgrounds, both religious and secular, but they have one thing in common: they are never original, which helps to account for the large number of plays on the same or similar subjects.⁶ It is the minor variations in these stories over the centuries that reflect the changes in the theatrical world of different parts of Europe at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period.

For convenience, the plays have been divided into four groups, according to subject matter. The divisions are based on the important collection of forty miracle plays found in the fourteenth-century Cangé MS, composed for performance at the annual meeting and dinner of a Parisian confraternity dedicated to the Virgin Mary, one each year from 1349 to 1382 (excluding 1354 and 1358–60 – years when Paris was under siege).⁷ In an article for the *Histoire littéraire de la France* (xxxix), the eminent French scholar, Alfred Jeanroy, pointed out that although all the plays are introduced as a ‘miracle de Notre Dame’ and contain an obligatory scene in which the Virgin Mary is honoured by the heavenly host singing specially composed *rondeaux*, more than half the plays are based on stories that have no connection with the Virgin. Jeanroy therefore divided the plays into four divisions: ‘Légendes mariales’ (seventeen plays); ‘Légendes de saints’ (eight plays); ‘Légendes romanesques et héroïques’ (eleven plays) and ‘Légendes historiques romancées’ (four plays).

The first group are straightforward dramatisations of well-known Marian miracles.⁸ But the Virgin Mary has no real connection with the saints’ lives in group two, or with most of the historical events in group four,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82756-0 - Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy

Lynette R. Muir

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

while many of the plays in group three are based on well-known stories from romances, such as the falsely accused queen, which were told and retold all over Europe in both religious and secular forms.⁹ These Cangé groups do not, of course, include all the subjects treated in the book, many of which were added in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, including the theatre of cruelty inspired by the classical plays of Seneca but also reflecting the violence of the Passion and martyrdom scenes in the medieval plays.

WHO STAGED THE MEDIEVAL STORIES?

Saints' plays, like biblical subjects, were usually staged by religious communities or civic groups, but were rare in the celebrations of Corpus Christi, except as part of a procession.¹⁰ There were a few examples of more personal arrangements. For example, in Metz in 1468, a play of the newly canonised St Catherine of Siena was commissioned by one Catherine de Baudoiche. The role of the saint was taken with great success by a girl of eighteen.¹¹ Stories on secular subjects, or presented in the form of miracle plays, might also be organised by trade guilds or religious confraternities, literary guilds or *Puys* (the title probably developed from the fact that the earliest such group was founded at Notre Dame du Puy in Valenciennes (Hainault). These *Puys* were most frequently found in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in northern France and the Low Countries. There was also a *Puy de London* modelled on the continental ones.¹²

Some of them were dedicated to poetry and music rather than drama, but others continued staging plays through to the sixteenth century. A morality, 'De la dame à l'Agneau et de la dame à l'Aspic' was presented as part of the ceremony at the meeting of the *Puy de la conception de la vierge* (also called the *Puy de palinods*) in Rouen in 1520. The play has an interesting double form: the conflict between the *Dame à l'agneau* (lamb) and the *Dame à l'aspic* (serpent) is not merely a struggle between the Virgin Mary and the Devil, it is also a clash between Rouen, whose crest was a Lady with a Lamb, and the Viper, the crest of Milan against whom Francis I had just declared war. I am grateful to Alan Hindley for finding me a copy of this interesting play. Further details of the *Puys* and an interesting account of the confraternity of the 'guilde des Archers' of Antwerp in 1493 is provided by Nigel Wilkins in an article based on a picture of the *Schuttersfeest* or 'fête de la guilde des archers du maître de Francfort (1493) et la musique des confréries'.¹³

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82756-0 - Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy

Lynette R. Muir

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Early drama in the Low Countries was also staged in both Dutch and French by many different street or neighbourhood groups. Nothing is known of the staging of the famous Dutch romances the *Abele spelen* (skilful plays) composed in the late fourteenth century. From about 1430 onwards, however, drama was mainly in the hands of the Chambers of Rhetoric, groups of fifteen to twenty men of all degrees from carpenters, to build and decorate the waggon stages, to the literate members, including clergy and doctors, who composed and directed the plays. Frequent contests were organised between the different Chambers of Rhetoric, on given subjects with valuable prizes.¹⁴

Some of the Italian plays are based on the lives of local saints such as St Guglielma, and were part of the very popular convent drama.¹⁵ They also provided material for court entertainment in many Italian cities. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, many German analogues of the French and Italian plays were created by the prolific cobbler and Mastersinger, Hans Sachs, and his fellow Nuremberger, Jacob Ayrer. Sachs not only composed more than 4,000 *Meisterlieder* to the strictly observed rules for both poetry and music, but plays of all kinds, including fifty-eight tragedies and seventy comedies, many based on stories by Boccaccio.¹⁶ In other parts of Europe, similar stories were dramatised for the newly developing public theatres by professional authors such as Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Hardy and Rotrou.¹⁷

By the fifteenth century an important contribution to the drama was also made by the Latin plays performed in schools and colleges. The desire to teach the boys to speak Latin fluently, and debate and discuss before an audience, encouraged this practice. In the sixteenth century, with the founding of the Society of Jesus in 1555, this academic drama spread all over Europe, with every one of the more than 500 Jesuit colleges staging at least two plays a year. Only a small proportion of the Jesuit drama was printed and a few other plays survive in the original manuscripts; but it has been calculated that even over only one century (and the Jesuits were active from 1550 to 1773) if all the plays had survived: 'yet an elementary mathematical operation – allowing for repetitions of some plays – sets the sum total of plays, conservatively, at nearly one hundred thousand'.¹⁸ Details of the many plays performed in the German colleges can be found in the *perioche* or summaries prepared for the parents and other members of the audience who had no Latin.¹⁹ The late development of public theatre in Germany, partly as a consequence of the Thirty Years War, meant that Jesuit drama had a much wider and more general audience in Germany than in France or Italy.²⁰

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82756-0 - Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy

Lynette R. Muir

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

In contrast, the audience for the plays performed at the Paris Jesuit Collège de Clermont was distinguished by its social status and included ladies although they knew no Latin. The *entractes* were occupied by ballets on a related subject or scenes in French. Elegant refreshments were also served and the audience and performances were commented on by the social newspapers of the period. The college was renamed Collège Louis-le-Grand in 1683 by Louis XIV, who had attended plays there for many years (accompanied in 1651 by Charles II of England and the duke of Gloucester). Other French colleges adhered more closely to the Jesuit principles of no women in the audience and exclusive use of Latin.²¹

Saints' plays continued in school and college drama and, put on by travelling players, in the provinces but in the seventeenth century the public theatres of Europe became increasingly addicted to national, historical and classical subjects for the tragedies, and the eighteenth century added the bourgeois drama with its stories of love and conflict.²² Subsequent developments of medieval traditions will be considered in the Conclusion.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82756-0 - Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy

Lynette R. Muir

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART ONE

*War in Heaven: saints and sinners***Saint:** A dead sinner revised and edited.

(Ambrose Bierce)

The majority of the texts in the first two chapters are described as saints' plays or miracles, the former mostly dealing with martyrdoms and conversions to Christianity, from the early church to the Reformation, and the latter with the sins and repentance of individual Christians. The focus is usually on a single character whose soul is the object of a tug-of-war between the forces of Heaven, often led by the Virgin Mary, and those of Hell.

Saints' plays may be divided into three main groups: martyrdom plays, plays about hermits and the work of Confessors and founders of religious orders. Extant saints' plays from the tenth to the end of the fifteenth century are numerous in French, Italian and Spanish, rare in German and English and unknown in Dutch. A unique play on a Celtic saint is the Cornish play of St Meriasek (*Beunans Meriasek*). The only surviving text is early sixteenth century but the saint, who probably dates from the seventh century, is depicted as a contemporary of Constantine. The sixteenth-century school drama included a very large number of Latin saints' plays from all parts of Catholic Europe.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82756-0 - Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy

Lynette R. Muir

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

The noble army of martyrs

There are too many martyrdom plays to consider them all in detail, so only a selection of the most popular or interesting ones can be mentioned here.

THE VIRGIN IN THE BROTHEL AND OTHER FEMALE SAINTS

The earliest surviving saints' plays are the six Latin ones composed by the German nun, Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, Saxony, in the tenth century.¹ She specifically claims Terence for her model and their importance and originality deserve separate treatment.² Three of her plays are based on the legends of martyrs: *Callimachus* is an original story based on a brief reference to a miracle of John the Apostle (*Legenda* 27 December); the other two are hermit plays. Only the first four will be discussed here.³

One feature that is striking in Hrotsvitha's martyrdom plays is the use of humour. In *Dulcitiuus*, a young man who believes he is embracing three Christian virgins, servants of St Anastasia and imprisoned in his kitchen, is in fact embracing dirty pots and pans, the maidens are untouched (St Anastasia, *Legenda* 25 December). He emerges so blackened no one recognises him.⁴ After vain attempts by soldiers to strip the girls naked they are finally executed.

Failure to accept offers of marriage by men of rank is nearly always the start of the troubles for these young Christian women. In addition to *Dulcitiuus*, Hrotsvitha uses the theme in *Gallicanus* which is the story more usually named after SS. John and Paul (*Legenda* 26 June) and dramatised by Lorenzo de Medici for the boys of a school in Florence: *SS. Giovanni e Paulo* (D'Ancona, II).⁵ In *Sapientia* on the other hand,⁶ the emperor is threatening a mother and her children, Faith, Hope and Charity, with martyrdom if they do not recant, and he asks her how old the girls are. She asks the children:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82756-0 - Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy

Lynette R. Muir

Excerpt

[More information](#)

‘Shall I puzzle his dull brain with some problems in arithmetic?’

FAITH: ‘Do mother, it will give us joy to hear you.’

SAPIENTIA: ‘O emperor, Charity has lived a diminished evenly even number of years; Hope a number also diminished, but evenly uneven; and Faith an augmented number, unevenly even.’ (trans. p. 137)

The emperor (not surprisingly) is bewildered and asks for explanations. Sapientia obliges with a rather patronising lesson in mathematics.⁷ The English translator is somewhat critical of this scene and the continued impertinence of the daughters during their martyrdom, and claims that only Dulcitus ‘was obviously designed to provoke laughter’ – a modern audience would disagree I think.

The story of *Callimachus* is not humorous nor a martyr play, but is based on the motif of desire. Callimachus is overwhelmed by his passion for Drusiana, a Christian woman in a celibate marriage, and attempts to become her lover. When she refuses, he threatens to trap her somehow. She prays to Christ that she may be able to keep her vow of chastity and immediately collapses and dies. Her distraught husband, Andronicus, has her buried and sends a messenger to St John the Evangelist. Meanwhile Callimachus, tempted and helped by a servant, Fortunatus, goes to the tomb, desperate to touch her body. When they open her sarcophagus he tries to kiss the corpse but a great serpent appears and kills both men. When St John and Andronicus arrive, they find the tomb open and the two dead men lying there. St John revives Callimachus who tells of a vision of an angel; he confesses his sin and is filled with remorse. John then revives Drusiana and is persuaded by Drusiana and her delighted husband to revive Fortunatus also, but when the latter learns that Drusiana is alive and Callimachus has become a Christian, he rejects life: ‘I would rather not exist than see them swelling with grace and virtue.’ St John compares him to the tree which only bore bad fruit and was cut down. Fortunatus’ wounds reopen and start bleeding and he dies again and is damned. John comments: ‘nothing is more terrible than envy, nothing more evil than pride’. They prepare to celebrate the conversion of Callimachus.

Other heroines who suffer because they will not marry include St Dorothy (*Legenda* 6 February; cult suppressed in 1969). Cioni lists eleven editions of the play of *Santa Dorotea vergine e martyre* and she is the subject of a rare English saints’ play, Massinger’s *The Virgin Martyr* (1620). The *Dorotheaspiel* fragment (ed. Ukena) is one of the few extant saints’ plays in German. For some virgin martyrs the brothel is not just a threat.⁸ In the thirteenth-century Provençal play of *St Agnes* (*Legenda* 21 January),

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82756-0 - Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy

Lynette R. Muir

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The noble army of martyrs

11

when she refuses her suitor and declares her intention of being a celibate Christian, she is placed, naked, in a brothel and immediately grows a complete covering of long hair.⁹

In Troterel's *St Agnes* (1615) the brothel miracles are not shown on stage (Lancaster, 1, i, p. 104). A similar fate (without the miracle of the hair) befalls *S. Teodora* (*Legenda* 11 September; D'Ancona, II).¹⁰ In the story of *Grisante y Daria* (D'Ancona, II), Daria is sent into a brothel but a lion 'escaped from the amphitheatre and stood guard at the door of the house of sin' (*Legenda* 25 October). When a man approaches the brothel the lion seizes him and Daria preaches Christianity and converts him. Finally the prefect orders Daria and the lion to be burnt. Daria allows the terrified lion to go where he likes provided he will harm no one. Grisante and Daria are finally executed.

One of the most popular female saints in Europe, St Barbara, was dramatised many times, including two very substantial versions in French.¹¹ In contrast to the virgins already mentioned, her father incarcerates her in a tower to prevent her making an unsuitable marriage. This is probably a variation on the classical story of Danae, though in this case it is a priest who manages to make his way into her dwelling and convert her to Christianity so that she insists on having three windows in the tower to represent the Trinity. When she finally refuses to marry the man of her father's choice and declares her Christianity, her father has her head cut off and he himself is immediately struck down by a thunderbolt, making St Barbara, among her many other responsibilities, the patron saint of artillerymen.¹²

Other popular female martyrs include Catherine of Alexandria, Apollonia and Cecilia. All had plays in Italian and some in French or Spanish also. St Catherine is the only female saint to feature regularly in Jesuit drama.¹³

THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT: ST STEPHEN
AND HIS SUCCESSORS

Among the well-known male saints to be martyred on stage are St Lawrence on his gridiron, Crispin and Crispianus, the shoemakers from Sens, who are unhurt when put into boiling oil,¹⁴ and St Christopher.¹⁵ Some of the multi-day French martyrdom plays are extremely elaborate with special effects, machinery and false bodies.¹⁶ Animals are also a popular adjunct to the scene. In the fifteenth-century Provençal play of St Pons (Henrard, p. 294) the martyr has to face giant bears and several plays

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82756-0 - Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy

Lynette R. Muir

Excerpt

[More information](#)

show the saint faced by lions.¹⁷ In *St Ignace* (Cangé, xxxiv), the executioners bring on the lions coupled together as if they were hounds, then sick them on to Ignace: 'hu! hu! sur lui! sur lui!'. Although they knock him down and kill him, they will not eat him despite the encouragement of the emperor. A similar scene occurs in the *Rappresentazione di S. Ignazio* (D'Ancona, 1) but in Castellano Castellani's *S. Venanzio*, the lions bow down and worship the saint and all the onlookers are converted.¹⁸ The terminal execution usually takes place off stage.

Three martyrs' lives show interesting variety and detail in their stories (some of which are now generally accepted as fiction) and were also staged over a long period of time. St George, St Eustace and St Genesius will be studied individually, from the medieval plays through to the mid-seventeenth century.

THE THREE FACES OF ST GEORGE

St George is unique among saints for having not merely two roles, as martyr and miracle worker, but a third, for in the sixteenth century the Byzantine warrior and dragon slayer moved on from being merely the patron saint of England and acquired English nationality, with English parents and a birth place and burial place in Warwickshire.¹⁹ This makeover will be considered in Part Three with the other popular heroes.

Little is genuinely known about the early life of George, neither his place of origin nor his date of birth. As Dom Leclercq puts it: 'Né à? En? Mort à? en?'²⁰ The executioners struggle to finish off this exceptionally tough martyr (the *megalomartyros* of the Eastern Church) for seven years before killing him by the only known successful method of dispatching a saint: they cut off his head.²¹

In his detailed study of this most important member of the *état-major* or top section of the warrior saints of the Byzantine church, Walter points out that the early accounts of his life and martyrdom are totally spurious. Although frequently presented in icons or other Byzantine art forms, often on a horse, the killing of the dragon was not linked to him before the eleventh century and George did not move into the Roman Western Church until the early crusades. In the later Middle Ages he became one of the busiest saints in Europe, patron of, among other regions, Portugal, Germany, Aragon (for a time he ousted Santiago), Genoa and Venice, protector of Ferrara and one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers. He was known in England from Saxon times but became England's patron when Richard I put his crusading army under the protection of St George.