Cultural perspective of the Saint Nicholas miracle play

Mary Frances Jeske

The University of Montana

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A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE
SAINT NICHOLAS MIRACLE PLAY

by

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B.A. Montana State University, 1941

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

1960

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MAY 27 1960

Date
The Saint Nicholas miracle play merits far more consideration than has been generally recognized. It is worthy of attention first as the earliest instance now extant of a miracle play in Europe and secondly as a unique art form which may best be viewed in relation to the historical and cultural movement of which it was an offspring. In preparing this study the writer found that from time immemorial the spell of the theater in all its forms has embraced a wide society of interests. This is particularly true of the medieval theater. As work on the thesis progressed, art, painting, sculpture, music, and the liturgy opened new vistas upon the colorful, moving panorama of artisans, actors, monks, poets and peasants, comedians and saints, bishops and kings of the Middle Ages.

The writer wishes to express her thanks to Miss Nan C. Carpenter, Mr. Vedder M. Gilbert, and Mr. Robert M. Burgess for valuable assistance received.
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INTRODUCTION

When in 1946 the slender volume by Father Harold Gardiner, S. J., Mysteries' End, appeared, it was as though a final page had been penned on the history of the medieval religious drama that had spanned five centuries of western civilization. Yet the perennial vitality of the medieval religious play has successfully engaged at least three distinguished scholars in England and America during the twentieth century. Thus, we find models of vigorous literary studies and competent humanistic research in Church drama of the Middle Ages in the works of Sir Edmund K. Chambers, Karl Young, and Hardin Craig, works deserving the highest praise. The significance of their accomplishments in this field can scarcely be exaggerated: one has only to become cognizant of the enormous gap in knowledge that existed

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before the contribution of these three eminent men to appreciate the importance of their work.\(^5\)

Previously in England and America there had been little more than a flurry of interest in the mystery and miracle plays; nevertheless, a little before the opening of the present century Manly had been one of the earliest to recognize the need for accurate and extensive information on what he considered an extremely interesting although little recognized part of our literary heritage.\(^6\) Manly had set out with the preannounced purpose of tracing the history of the drama on the Continent and in England from the beginning of the tenth century to the end of the sixteenth century.\(^7\) However, within a period of four years (1893-1897) Professor Manly had already found it advisable to expand the initial plan of his now famous collection of pre-Shakespearean plays.

This he felt was justified by the many new facts coming to light. Furthermore as he stated with sensitive insight, "it seemed not merely desirable, but even imperative, to illustrate certain phases of the early drama which


\(^7\)Ibid., xi.
had in collections of a similar character either been neglected or not sharply defined against the apparently monotonous background of mediaeval dramatic art. This desire for clarification was soon to become even more sharply focused in the scholarly attempt to name and define the classes of medieval drama.9

These motives alone would surely have been sufficient reason for undertaking the publication of a volume on the medieval religious plays just beginning to emerge from the hazy background beneath the mist of centuries. Yet Manly's perspicuity wisely included a third aspect that has become incorporated in varying degrees in all the later publications. Even before the Church drama could clearly be seen as a definite form with a development of its own and even before modern scholarship had revealed a more objective picture of the exuberant nature of the Middle Ages than the widely accepted opinion at the time of Manly's writing, Manly had the keenness to realize that a different kind of annotation would be needed from that previously in evidence if the proposed volumes were to provide "an effective introduction to

8Ibid., v.

9See George R. Coffman, A New Theory Concerning the Origin of the Miracle Play (Menasha: George Banta, 1914).
an art as spacious and as hospitable as the mediaeval Church." The new writing was intended "to render intelligible and vital to the student forms of art so different from ours in aim, in spirit, in method, in conventions, and in material accessories.

Time has accentuated the distance in attitude between modern and medieval man, and the need voiced by Manly is still more insistent today. Nevertheless, great strides have been made to narrow the gap. The brilliant work that Karl Young was later to accomplish in his systematic study of the structure and development of medieval drama could not, of course, have been envisioned in Manly's early publication. Nor could Young's endeavor have succeeded so effectively, one feels, without the scholarly impetus of Sir Edmund Chambers, who viewed the medieval drama for the paradox that it was: a paradox of life and death, a time of the ancient classical drama, presumably dead, for several hundred years while Christianity and barbarianism faced the challenge of the making of Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire, a period leading to "a most singular new birth of the drama in

\(^{10}\) Manly, op. cit., I, p. v.

\(^{11}\) Ibid.
the very bosom of the Church's own ritual." Noting these singular circumstances from which modern drama originated, Chambers did not hesitate to place these beginnings within the Mass and the Office of the Church in the liturgical celebrations for Easter and Christmas. Chambers' volumes on the medieval stage have been well received and merit for him the title affectionately bestowed, "master of dramatic history" they continue to be indispensable in any study of the medieval religious play.

Although Chambers did in fact unquestionably isolate the Church drama as a separate form, he was primarily interested in exploring the social and economic background of the medieval stage. The colorful pageant of the Middle Ages attracted him, and he followed with eager eye and ear where singing jongleurs and dancing merrymakers beckoned; in doing so he exposed, almost as a by-product of his primary intention, a portion of the tangled root from which the history of Church drama grew. On the other hand, Young concentrated from the start on available texts of Church drama, hoping to supply students with pertinent information on the setting of the liturgical plays within the Church service. From this

12Chambers, op. cit., II, p. 2
13Young, op. cit., I, p. xv.
modest proposal developed a work of monumental proportions. Young centered his attention upon Church drama throughout Europe during the Middle Ages and proceeded in a thorough, systematic manner to assemble all the then known texts, furnishing at the same time a continuing commentary. It was a gigantic labor "concerned with hundreds of separate dramatic pieces written during a period of five or six centuries and produced in scores of churches all over Western Europe," but the completion of the huge task showed in solid relief the structure of Church drama from its tenth-century origins down to the Reformation.

Once Chambers had in large measure opened the field and Young had followed by a "brilliantly executed arrangement" of more than 400 texts of medieval religious drama, a substantial knowledge of the beginnings of Church drama and its rapid spread throughout Europe had been made available. As a logical sequence, some study of the end of this flourishing type of medieval play was next required; Father Gardiner undertook precisely such a project in seeking the reasons for the discontinuance of what had come to be seen as an extremely popular and widely established form of

14 Young, op. cit., I, p. xii.

15 Craig, p. 5.
entertainment and instruction up to the very moment of its sudden disappearance. This he did at a time not inappropriately tinged with the sadness associated with the dreadful days of World War II. The opening pages in which the author relates conditions at the time of his research create an aura of regret for the immeasurable loss caused by the destructiveness of war. Coventry Cathedral had been demolished. One experiences the poignant recollection of bombs falling in England, of whole libraries with their precious documents wiped out. But if no one had yet sufficiently correlated the assumed end of the Church drama to the "activities of government under the Reformation impulse," Mysteries' End furnishes a conclusive study of the interplay of these factors.

But the mystery and miracle plays are not dead. With Hardin Craig's recently published book, The English Drama, a new lease, a revived literary interest in medieval drama seems at hand. This sprightly yet scholarly book, the author maintains, is not meant to supersede the work of Chambers and Young. As he is careful to point out, it is intended rather to complement their works, filling in with greater detail areas which they had left untouched. Thus Craig not only supplements previous works but by concentrating on the English

16 Gardiner, p. xiii.
drama and by integrating with his own findings the finest of previous scholarship pertinent to his purpose he reduces the unwieldy mass of information into a single, dynamic, and intelligible whole. To an even greater degree Hardin Craig succeeds in creating an original work of exciting dimensions. This is particularly noteworthy since, whereas the orderly stages of development as seen in Young's grouping might be misleading, Craig captures something of the spirit of springtime flowering of the Middle Ages. Of greater significance, however, Craig confidently views medieval drama as worthy of interest in itself, repeatedly emphasizing its religious nature and inviting the reader to accept it on its own terms. With deft touches he praises the "simple naturalness" and the "almost inexhaustible appeal" that carries down to our own day.

The present study undertakes a brief examination of a Latin and of a vernacular Saint Nicholas play, viewed in relation to their cultural background. The *Tres Clerici*, the earliest of the two plays, is from the twelfth-century Fleury Playbook and is written in Latin by an unknown author. The second play, the *Jeu de S. Nicolas*, is written in the vernacular by Jean Bodel, a poet of Arras, writing at a slightly

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17 Craig, p. 3.
18 Ibid., p. 4.
later date. The comparatively short time that elapsed between the writing of the *Tres Clerici* and the *Jeu de S. Nicholas* (one dating from the early half and the other from nearly the closing years of the twelfth century) witnessed a change within the plays and the milieux: from Latin to vernacular, from anonymous to known author, and from monastery to city.
PART I. LATIN SAINT NICHOLAS PLAY AND
BACKGROUND: TRES CLERICI
CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL SURVEY

Dark Ages

Almost assuredly the Saint Nicholas play, as far as can be ascertained from our present knowledge, originated at Fleury\(^1\) in the valley of the Loire during the early Middle Ages. At a time when Europe was slowly emerging from what are commonly called the Dark Ages, it was in the valley of the Loire that "chinks of light"\(^2\) began very early to shine upon the havoc that ensued from the waning of the Roman Empire and the ferocity of the barbarian invasions. The scene gradually became one of vigorous activity radiating from Benedictine monasteries with monks clearing fields, sowing, and building. Churches built of small stones, and roofed with thatch or wood gave way to buildings made of larger stones and vaulted ceilings also made of stone. "Everywhere men

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were planning and measuring, hewing and planing, for the abbeys and churches that were to house God in His land of France.  

The wonderful flowering of the Middle Ages followed upon a period in which some of the basic problems of civilization had been at stake in the long conflict between the dying Roman Empire and the violent barbarian forces. Two essential features of civilization which had been gradually fading in the absence of a political or cultural unity and which the medieval world revived and preserved were the idea of the universal and the idea of the individual, giving an importance of a high order to the concept of the human person. 

The period of persecutions had required heroic vigor and purity on the part of the Church. After the Church had successfully resisted exposure to the dangers of persecution, decadence, and barbarity rampant in the early centuries, the Church later had begun to reflect a relaxation from that heroism which had earlier been demanded. Even though France had been evangelized for several centuries, the cultural aspects of the Church were inherently Roman; it could well be expected then that Christian society might find itself

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4 See Daniel-Rops, p. 245.
5 Ibid., p. 574.
"caught in the irresistible current of intellectual decadence which dominated the final centuries of the Roman Empire."6 Education had continued, but the teaching methods had become somewhat lifeless. Rhetoric, it was claimed, was "richer in conceits than in real culture."7 The influence of such distinguished men as Boethius and Cassiodorus that was later to become widespread was then at its nadir. That such an extensive rebirth of the arts should occur under these unpromising conditions is one of the marvels of Western civilization.

Irish and Anglo-Saxon Influence

While the Continent lay moribund, one could find to the north active schools of learning and of native art which were to give a new impetus to European culture. Ireland in the sixth century was the real leader of Western culture.8 So greatly did learning flourish in the Emerald Isle that the seventh and eighth centuries are justly considered the Golden Age of Irish Christian culture.9 It was a time when

6 Ibid., p. 247.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid., p. 176.
a wide development of Irish monasteries took place and when Irish missionaries spread westward to England and south to Europe. The houses founded on the Continent carried on this intellectual work, and they in turn became literary as well as ascetic centers, cultivating established schools of rhetoric. "But the real importance," as Dawson points out, "lies in the impulse that they gave to missionary activity."10 For it was as missionaries "that the Celtic monks made their most important contribution to European culture."11 Dawson states that at the beginning of the eighth century "continental culture had reached its lowest ebb"12 and that the turn of the tide may be credited to the coming of the Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries.

Irish monks had come to Gaul as early as 585 A. D., when St. Columban arrived with twelve monks from Bangor, thereby initiating a great wave of monastic building.13 One of the most interesting features of the monastic establishments was the scriptorium, which employed the ablest and most intelligent monks.14

10 Ibid., p. 177.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., p. 194.
13 Evans, p. 4.
and St. Gall "became famous for their schools of copyists."  

The script employed was bold, imaginative, flexible -- an artistic achievement in its own right unsurpassed today. Among medieval manuscripts the Book of Kells (a product of the eighth or ninth century) is an example of supreme beauty. In the dynamic quality of its handwriting "we are confronted with a design that needs no further guarantee of power to please than the conviction it imparts of organic life."  

Carolingian Renaissance

At Charlemagne's request Alcuin, a distinguished English monk, was called to France to start the Palace School. Both Anglo-Saxon and Irish scholars and copyists flocked to the palace school as well as to the great continental abbeys. A brief epoch was inaugurated, the epitome of which might be described as "the gathering together of the scattered elements of the classical and patristic traditions and their reorganization as the basis of a new culture."  

Dawson considers the unity thus achieved as "the greatest of all

15 Ibid., p. 195.
17 Dawson, p. 195.
18 Ibid.
the achievements of the Carolingian age."  

Schnurer, too, recognizing the organizing genius of Charlemagne, views the collaboration of church and state as "due chiefly to the fact that Charlemagne, acting in the spirit of the Church, imposed upon his empire a cultural mission which he conceived in a serious and ideal sense."  

In the success of this cultural mission Schnurer believes lies, "next to the gigantic task of political unification," Charlemagne's great merit.

The Carolingian Renaissance was not destined to last long, except in the valley of the Loire, where elements of Carolingian classicism lingered. Internal war and outward strife throughout other parts of France delayed by almost two hundred years the true dawning of the great Middle Ages. Thus, it is natural that at the end of the Gallic epoch we look to the central part of Gaul as the cradle of the arts since it alone evidenced a society "socialement et intellectuellement, plus évoluée que le Nord et l'Aquitaine."  

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19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Evans, p. 4.
Fleury at this time not only boasted a Roman basilica whose sculptures are much admired even today but also had a center of classical studies, a center of Latin poetry, and a center "si importante de dramaturgie latine"\(^24\) that Gustave Cohen bestows upon Fleury the title of Metropole du Drame Liturgique.\(^25\) The birth of the religious theater, Cohen insists, is one of the most distinctive manifestations of the intellectual activity of the medieval period,\(^26\) and indeed as we come to realize the strength of the cooperative body of church and people working together, it is not difficult to imagine the most active collaboration "des maîtres et des grands écoliers clercs, pour la création et la réalisation scénique"\(^27\) of liturgical drama.

\(^{24}\) Cohen, La Grande Clarité du Moyen-Âge, p. 86.

\(^{25}\) Ibid.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
CHAPTER II
THE FLEURY PLAYBOOK
THE MANUSCRIPT

The Fleury Playbook is of extreme interest and rather considerable importance for its wealth of richly developed liturgical plays in a finished form. One may safely presume that the manuscript, now preserved at Orleans, was written at Fleury, also called Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire. The arguments against this assumption are negligible; Grace Frank carefully weighs the objections and concludes the manuscript almost certainly originated at Fleury.\(^1\) We have already seen that by the early Middle Ages Fleury had become a thriving center for music, writing and drama. Craig cites the manuscript as giving evidence of a wide experience in making and developing dramatic liturgical additions to the monastic services of divine worship and states that the artistic quality of the plays might certainly be expected in such a liturgical center.\(^2\) With characteristic insight Craig perceives "poets enough and experience enough to produce plays of very considerable artistic and lyrical merit."\(^3\) In the variety of


\(^2\) Craig, p. 35.

\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 35, 36.
form and content of the plays Miss Frank sees a convincing indication that they must have originated "in a centre where literary and musical activity had flourished over a considerable period and where associations with France, England, and the Empire were extensive."^4

The Fleury Playbook contains four Saint Nicholas plays: Tres Filiae, Tres Clarici, Iconia Sancti Nicolai, and Filius Getronia, based on miracles believed to have been performed by the kindly bishop. This same manuscript contains the Visit of the Three Marys at the Tomb and the Journey to Emmaus among its six liturgical dramas. When we consider that the Playbook is really a collection of ten plays, containing not only the elaborate Easter and Christmas plays, Visitatio Sepulchri, Ordo Stellae, Ordo Rachelia, and Paracrina, but two New Testament plays, Raising of Lazarus and Conversion of St. Paul, in addition to the four Saint Nicholas plays, we appreciate how fitting it is that the Fleury Playbook should be styled, as Albrecht does not hesitate to assert, "probably the most extensive and precious collection of medieval Latin drama extant."^5

^4Frank, p. 44.
^5Albrecht, p. 1.
THE LANGUAGE

The language of the manuscript, Craig confidently assures us, need pose little difficulty. Ecclesiastical Latin he terms a "rather easily crossed barrier" because, as he explains, "a large part of the Christian world still uses it . . . in a state but little changed from that of the medieval church." Even for many who no longer use Latin in their church worship, Craig claims that "the rest of the Christian world . . . expresses the same ideas and attitudes in vernacular languages."

At a very early time a tendency to introduce modern languages into the Latin plays appears, "but at the very first the vernacular parts seem to be choral or explanatory rather than direct translation." The transition offers "no new and revolutionary elements . . . , no new motives." One only regrets "the awkwardness and verbosity of modern languages as compared to Latin" and perceives an intrusion of "slight amounts of popular and secular materials." In the first play which we are to consider, the very simple *Tres Clerici* from the Fleury Playbook, the lines are entirely in Latin and

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6 Craig, p. 1.  
7 Ibid.  
8 Ibid.  
9 Ibid.  
10 Ibid., p. 96.  
11 Ibid., p. 1.  
12 Ibid.  
13 Ibid.
illustrate very well the power and masculinity, the brevity and compactness, which Craig so admired. The gradual change in language from Latin to vernacular coincided with a trend to bring church drama closer to the people.

Medieval religious drama is characterized by two features: it "began in the church and not in the theatre, in song and not in spoken dialogue."\textsuperscript{14} The Saint Nicholas play, a relatively minor but easily isolated type of the religious drama, parallels the direction taken by the church drama. One readily assents to Professor Craig's conviction that "however brilliant and progressive the French religious drama seems to be, it must nevertheless have traveled over the same road as the religious drama of England."\textsuperscript{15} This well traversed road is, of course, "from Latin to vernacular, simple to complex, and religious to secular."\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, the Latin drama of the church with which we are concerned is but one step removed from that Latin drama "fundamental to all other religious drama of the Middle Ages,"\textsuperscript{17} for which the best preparation we can bring for understanding appreciation is some knowledge of the Middle Ages themselves. In taking this path

\textsuperscript{14}Craig, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. v.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., pp. v, vi.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 1.
we may be confident, as Craig assures us, that it will bring with it in return a vastly increased appreciation "of the greatness resident in simple humanity" together with an increased respect for the achievements of medieval Christianity.

CHURCH MUSIC

"Church music had its full share in the literary and artistic movement of the ninth century." Although the general tenor of the ninth century was far from that united entity later to be achieved in the medieval period, still a political unity had been effected and a uniform worship established throughout the Church. A renowned music scholar informs us that the majority of the melodies employed today in Gregorian chant were composed in the period between 400 A.D. and 700 A.D. Recent scholarship has restored the melodic line in its original purity. The psalms and parts of the Mass sung in this manner are named for Pope Gregory the Great, sometimes styled "the first modern man." Two periods may be noted in the development of the chant: a) 300 A.D. - 600 A.D., when the melody was very simple—with one exception which we shall consider later,—and b) 600 A.D. to 750 A.D., when the words became richly ornamented. Even

18Ibid., p. 15.


though Gregory died in 604 A.D., the singular continuity of his policy through the school founded at Rome as a model music school appears to justify the application of his name to this method of singing. Gregorian Chant when well performed has been regarded as an independent art of high quality. 21

Pertinent to our study of the Saint Nicholas play in its medieval background, Harrison stresses the place of plainsong in the life and education of the period: "It is not always realised that ritual plainsong was the staple fare of the medieval musician, the material of his musical education and the basis of his professional qualifications." 22 This music was, moreover, extremely attractive to the people, and they responded with enthusiasm.

As the sung ritual of the Mass and the Office developed and expanded, hymns, sequences and tropes flourished. 23 In addition, a secular element crept in. Smits van Waesberghe, in fact, attributes "the immediate success" of the trope and sequence in the ninth century "to their relationship with the secular song, folksong." 24

21 Ibid., p. 6.
23 Smits van Waesberghe, p. 44, ff.
24 Ibid., p. 47.
CHAPTER III

CULT OF SAINT NICHOLAS

The veneration with which Saint Nicholas has been honored for many generations and the number of shrines and churches dedicated to him bear witness to the confidence of the people in his protection. During the Middle Ages, his cult enjoyed a wide following. In England alone in the later Middle Ages nearly four hundred churches were dedicated to his name. Of his life little is recorded that is indubitably authentic. About the only facts that can be ascertained with any degree of accuracy identify Nicholas as Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor in the fourth century. He is known to have died there and to have been buried in his cathedral at Myra.

Persisting accounts of his childhood inform us that from his earliest days Nicholas fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, taking nourishment only once on those days and that in the evening. He appears to have been born in Patara in Lycia, a province of Asia Minor, of wealthy parents, who carefully tended to his education and upbringing but who died while Nicholas was still a young man, leaving him their wealth.

25 See Coffman, pp. 45-51.

Nicholas determined to devote his inheritance to works of charity.

An opportunity soon arose. A citizen of Patara had lost all his money, and had moreover to support three daughters who could not find husbands because of their poverty; so the wretched man was going to give them over to prostitution. This came to the ears of Nicholas, who thereupon took a bag of gold and, under cover of darkness, threw it in at the open window of the man's house. Here was a dowry for the eldest girl, and she was soon duly married. At intervals Nicholas did the same for the second and third; at the last time the father was on the watch, recognized his benefactor, and over-whelmed him with gratitude.27

Coming to Myra after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Egypt, Nicholas was chosen Bishop of Myra in the year 325. Young relates that "he became esteemed especially for acts of benevolence, and was famed for a succession of supernatural deeds."28 He is reported to have suffered persecution and imprisonment under Diocletian and subsequently to have been released upon Constantine's ascension to power. A miracle related by the Greek Christians and for a long time the most famous miracle of St. Nicholas was his instrumentality in obtaining the freedom of three officers jailed on false charges in Constantinople and under sentence of death. Nicholas is credited with having appeared in a dream to Constantine ordering the release of the three innocent men.

27Ibid., p. 504.
28Young, II, p. 308.
Popular accounts enriched his memory with acts of kindness bestowed upon those in trouble. He became especially the patron of sailors and students.

All the accounts are unanimous in affirming that St. Nicholas died and was buried in his episcopal city of Myra. By the time of Justinian there was a basilica built in his honor at Constantinople, and already by the tenth century an anonymous Greek writer testified that his cult had spread from the East to the West, that many churches were built in his honor, that icons of him were venerated, and that in many places panegyrics were preached and festivals celebrated. Nicholas' favors did not cease with his death. Further miracles were accomplished through his intercession and through a healing oil which flowed from his tomb.

Eventually when the city of Myra and its great shrine were taken by the Saracens, Italian merchants took the body of St. Nicholas to Bari, in southern Italy, in 1087. Devotion to St. Nicholas was well known in the West before the transfer of his relics from Myra to Bari, "but this happening naturally greatly increased his veneration among the people, and miracles were as freely attributed to his intercession in Europe as they had been in Asia." Young and

29Attwater, p. 505.
30Ibid.
Coffman point out that the event marked "the real florescence"\(^\text{31}\) of this devotion in Western Europe. The shrine at Bari became the goal of frequent pilgrimages. Although the cult spread, it was particularly in the northern, central, and eastern regions of France that it most prospered. There the *vita* of St. Nicholas were extremely popular, and there at least four of the legends relating his miracles were given dramatic form in the twelfth century. These are found in the Fleury Playbook, as well as in less perfect versions in the other centers which seemed to have relied upon Fleury. These legends, though lacking historical evidence, have persisted tenaciously and have become crystallized in icon and hymn as well as in plays.

In the East, St. Nicholas was venerated especially as the patron of sailors, while the West frequently looked upon him as the patron of children. The earliest iconographic depiction of the *Tres Clerici* legend in which the Bishop restores three little students to life is found in England. A charming baptismal font in Winchester Cathedral seems to combine the legends of East and West, for not only are the three young scholars sculptured on the font, but at the far right corner one may see a little boat. The font is in lead sculpture typical of Tournai during the Norman period. The active influence of the Normans in England was at its height

\(^{31}\text{Young, II, p. 308.}\)
at the very time the ancient church at Winchester was being rebuilt at the site of the present cathedral.

The south side of the font is divided roughly into three scenes to which the vertical staff of Saint Nicholas appearing in two of the miracles represented and the vertical shaft of the cross in the scene farthest right give a strong linear focus. St. Nicholas here as elsewhere is always pictured in episcopal array with mitre and staff. The style of the Winchester font for the most part is crude but rather good for the period. The artist has naively cut the frame border to allow room for the top of the cross which acts also as mainstaff for the sails. It is the boat, however, that is exceptionally attractive artistically. Three passengers silently ride in a boat conceived in a design of Viking verve not at all out of harmony with a certain quiet reflectiveness, even sadness, that dominates the scene. One surmises that although not visibly present St. Nicholas guides the till.

Variety in Iconography

The iconography of St. Nicholas offers unusual interest for it is widespread and depicts most frequently the two well-known miracles, the dowry given to the young girls and the restoration to life of the three little scholars. The iconography finds expression in the spirit of the age stemming
from the unique creative impulse of the Romanesque, and St.
Nicholas may be seen honored in stone, in stained glass, in
fonts, in brasses, in embroidered vestments, and in illumin-
ated manuscripts. Male writes that "figures of St. Nicholas
are constantly seen in all the French mediaeval churches. At
Chartres... St. Nicholas is painted or carved no less than
seven times." 33

England

A Gild of St. Nicholas composed of parish clerks gave
performances in London during the Middle Ages. 34 The Gild
is first noted in 1300. The records state that they per-
formed in the open at Skinner's Well, near Clerkenwell in the
suburbs"; 35 it is likely that school boys from St. Paul's
assisted in the performances. School boys also enjoyed the
custom of the Boy Bishop, a custom reported as still extant
in 1507. Chambers relates that Eton College and King's College,
Cambridge, were dedicated to the Virgin and to St. Nicholas. 36

32 See Albrecht, PASSIM.

33 Emile Male, Religious Art in France in the Thirteenth
Century. A Study in Mediaeval Iconography and its Sources of
1913), p. 328

34 Chambers, English Literature, p. 16

35 Ibid.

36 Chambers, Nat. Stage, I, p. 365.
One finds curious references in Stow's detailed *Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster*\(^3\) to later medieval and Elizabethan churches named in honor of St. Nicholas.

"Then is the Parish Church of St. Nicolas Acon, or Bacon, for so have I read it in Records."\(^3\) The church is situated on Lombard Street, and the record continues, "Sir John Bridges, Draper, Mayor, 1520, newly repaired this Church, and imbtattled it, and was there buried."\(^3\) St. Nicholas Cold Abbey, "a comely Church, somewhat ancient,"\(^4\) was on a lower level than the street so that one had to descend some steps in order to enter the body of the church. Mayor and fishmonger are buried side by side in the adjoining cemetery. The *Survey* carries the rather interesting comment that the church was the "first built and finished" after the Great Fire.\(^4\) The last example that we shall give, the parish church of St. Nicholas Olave, on the west side of Trinity Lane, "a convenient Church,"\(^4\) was repaired and beautified in 1623. It too was destroyed in the Fire.

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\(^4\)Ibid., I, p. 481.
Monasteries celebrated with joy and ever increasing elaborateness the various saints' feast days. Both monk and laity entered whole-heartedly into these festivals. From the rich tradition of the Latin hymn a new form appeared honoring the favorite saint by singing his life and miracles. Tropes flourished during the ninth and tenth centuries, and St. Nicholas was not without his devotees. Hrabanus Maurus, in Fulda, wrote one of the first authentic sequences of St. Nicholas. The sequence is dated 818. At times the faithful entered too raucously into the celebrations and had to be rebuked. One instance is the rather well publicized mischievousness of the boys' pranks in later centuries during the single day's rule of the Boy-Bishop.

To review briefly, the Fleury Playbook manuscript has been discussed, along with the fact that it was in Latin and that it was intended to be performed with music. The few known facts about the life of Saint Nicholas have been touched upon, together with the various forms of his iconography in Western Europe following the transfer of his relics from Myra to Bari in 1087. It was noted that Saint Nicholas was honored by icons, churches, hymns and plays. Our attention is now directed to the short piece in the Fleury collection identified as Tres Clarici.
CHAPTER IV

TRES CLERICI

From Legends to Drama

The Fleury Playbook "contains the repertory of a famous monastery and suggests the resources available in such a place for dramatizing a large variety of subjects and making them piquant to the faithful."\(^1\) In this collection *Tres Clerici* is placed side by side with Easter and Christmas plays, the *Raising of Lazarus* and the *Conversion of St. Paul*, and three other plays on St. Nicholas. *Tres Clerici* shares that quality of piquancy, so aptly applied by Miss Frank, first of all in its choice of subject. The number of legends in the early medieval period was very large and the "body of plays which they inspired during the late medieval period in the European vernaculars was enormous."\(^2\) The range of appropriate subjects was as wide as the register of the saints themselves, and of their varied lives and acts. In the time element of the Fleury collection we note the passing of nearly three hundred years between the lives of St. Paul and of St. Nicholas. Playwrights made voluminous use of their sources

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1 Frank, p. 51.
2 Young, II, p. 308.
of saints' lives, yet "during the earlier centuries, . . . the number of miracle plays designed for use in churches appears to have been relatively small." In fact, only one saint has come down to us in Church plays extant and complete: St. Nicholas.

Although Tres Clerici was meant to be performed in church, an intimate knowledge of church service is not necessary for an understanding of these early miracle plays. It is sufficient for our purpose to recall that the origin of church drama begins with tropes, which were additions or amplifications of the liturgy. We recall how the Easter plays grew from a simple trope, the first known play being simply a putting of words to the sung vowel of the "Alleluia" of the Introit celebrating the feast of Christ's resurrection. Tropes were "attempts at beautification and were features of the Carolingian Renaissance in music and letters." The purely musical amplification is usually considered to have appeared early in the eighth century; tropes proper appeared in the ninth century and were widely used until the sixteenth century. One of the earliest forms of trope appears in the tenth-century manuscript from St. Gall. It was that which was sung at the Introit of the Easter Mass and is the ear-

3 Young, II, p. 308.
4 Craig, pp. 30, 31.
liest version of the *Quem quaeritis* trope, as it has come to be called. A familiar version frequently cited is that from the *Regularis Concordia*, the famous Winchester trope which was prepared at the request of St. Ethelwold for the guidance of the Benedictine observance in England. It was written sometime between 965 and 975. A more advanced Easter trope appears in the Fleury Playbook with *Tres Clerici*. 
Through Music and Verse

That the Fleury plays are in verse and set to music is natural, for during the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries "thousands of rhythmical and versified musical pieces" were composed to embellish liturgical celebrations. At Fleury around 1100 we even know the name of one of the masters who was teaching versification in the monastery at that time -- Raoul Tortaire, who was himself then composing poems in honor of St. Benedict and his disciples. The plays at first glance look so unlike what we ordinarily conceive as drama that it is difficult in the beginning to regard them as anything more than poetry. *Tres Clerici*, for example, has a rigid structure of four-lined stanzas of decasyllabic couplets, yet who would deny that within its tiny compass, as Chambers and Craig both insist, are found the three elements that constitute drama: impersonation, dialogue, and action.6

In appearance, then, the little play, *Tres Clerici*, is remarkably like a hymn. Its versification is easily recognized as being modeled on the great Latin hymn writers of the preceding centuries.7 At the same time there is an unquestionable application of genuine dramatic art. The "hybrid

5 Young, ii, p. 311.
6 Chambers, i, p. 6; Craig, p. 3.
7 Coffman, pp. 58, 59.
place between hymn and drama assigned to an early version of the legend of the three clerks found at a monastery in Hildesheim may not fittingly be applied to the Fleury play. A new breath of the Renaissance has been introduced. In spirit and in form Coffman finds the honoring of Saint Nicholas peculiarly adapted to Renaissance innovation. Both he and Young detect the beginning of a pagan spirit in this short piece. So fully medieval in tone, so uniquely appropriate to the flourishing creative impulse of life in the Middle Ages are the early Saint Nicholas plays that Coffman sees in "the circumstances and conditions of the eleventh century" which produced them the key to the origin of the Miracle Play. He is persuaded that the "men of the monasteries represent a new spirit, the spirit of the renaissance. The subtle blending of the religious and artistic impulse is achieved with an extraordinary unity that defies analysis and division. Each of the four Saint Nicholas plays in the Fleury Playbook seems intended as part of a liturgical service. Three end with liturgical pieces in prose; Tres

8 Coffman, p. 59.
9 Ibid., p. 51.
10 Coffman, pp. 58-59; Young, II, p. 334.
11 Coffman, p. v.
12 Ibid., p. 51, ff.
13 Frank, p. 46.
Clerici ends with the choir singing the *Te Deum*. The latter play was probably intended for the feast of Saint Nicholas on December 6, and no doubt was performed following Vespers or perhaps Matins and Lauds. It surely seems to have been a part of the services for that day, and yet there is no conclusive evidence that this piece developed from tropes as did the *Quem quaeritis* plays.\(^14\) Craig concludes from his study of the Saint Nicholas plays that they "originated from the liturgy as additions to the church services rather than as the inventions of dramatists for dramatic purposes."\(^15\) With this opinion one concurs wholeheartedly, fascinated by the dramatic skill of the author.

From the material that has come down to us we look straight to the legends. Young contends that the Saint Nicholas plays rest "directly upon complete forms of the legends themselves . . . and appear to have arisen through the application of the dramatic treatment directly to these stories."\(^16\) Miss Frank infers that once dramatic principles had become established and were understood, "the short step from the dramatisation of one kind of story, the biblical, to another, the saint's legend, might have been taken by

\(^{14}\) Young, p. 310.
\(^{15}\) Craig, p. 320.
\(^{16}\) Young, p. 310.
an innovator at any time for some pertinent occasion."17
They were fashioned by artists "from the warmth of their faith and the desire to give it a visible, dynamic expression.18

Author

The author of Tres Clerici is not known. The identity of the writer or writers lies hidden under the almost universal anonymity that characterized medieval artists and craftsmen. Tres Clerici was written during a period when the collective body was all important; the Fleury plays were no doubt a communal endeavor "in the sense that they were instituted, performed, and managed by communities, and they grew by a sort of incremental amplification by anonymous writers from time to time."19

17 Frank, p. 94.
18 Ibid., p. 17.
19 Craig, p. 10.
Versification

Comparing Tres Clerici to its companion pieces in the Fleury Playbook, we find that the versification as previously indicated is typical of medieval Latin poetry. Each of the four Saint Nicholas plays are written in "rhythmic or accessional verse in regular strophe-form, with the exception of a monologue of twenty-one lines in the Iconia play, where the author uses quantitative rimed hexameters."20 The strophe form in Tres Clerici is so regular that on two occasions the dialogue of the old man with the clerks and later with his wife are written in couplets that neatly continue the strophe form. A similar instance occurs in the fifteenth stanza, which also employs two couplets for the speech of Saint Nicholas and the host.21 The rhyme scheme usually follows the pattern aabb. Young notes a "certain lack of fertility"22 in the frequent repetition of some of the rhyme-words as in hospitium, spatium, but he finds in the mild flexibility in the use of the Fleury stanza one of its most interesting aspects from the dramatic point of view.23

20 Albrecht, p. 75.
21 See text in Young, II, pp. 330-332.
22 Young, II, p. 333.
23 Ibid., p. 334.
The following stanza spoken by the second clerk at the beginning of *Tres Clerici* will furnish an example of the verse form and suggest as well something of the pagan quality introduced by the Fleury writer. It is especially in the first two lines of this stanza that Young and Petit de Julleville find that "the Fleury writer, indeed, creates a certain literary tone of his own" by introducing the pagan suggestiveness of these lines into a Christian play.

*Iam sol equos tenet in litore,*
*quos ad presens mergit sub equore.*
*Nec est nota nobis hec patria;*
*ergo queri debent hospicia.*

Unlike the strictly liturgical plays, which often employ Scriptural quotation, not one of the four Fleury Saint Nicholas plays contains any admixture of prose. The antiphon, however, which concludes the play may be in prose. The first play, which celebrates Saint Nicholas' gift of a dowry to three needy girls, ends with an antiphon in prose, *O Christi pietas.* *Tres Clerici,* as we have seen, closes with the singing of *Te Deum.* Of the four dramas, *Iconia Sancti Nicolai* uses the most complex versification; the chorus, *Statuit ei Dominus,* which is the Introit for the Mass for Saint Nicholas' day, closes the play. A verse chorus, *Copiosa caritatis,* consisting of four fifteen-syllable lines in trochaic tetrameter without internal or end rhymes, marks the end of the last play, *Filius Getronis.*

24 Young, II, p. 334; Petit de Julleville, I, p. 71.
25 Albracht, pp. 75-80.
Themes

Themes in the four Fleury plays may be traced to four popular legends of Saint Nicholas. In *Tres Filiae* the kindly Bishop saves three young girls from giving themselves to lives of prostitution by providing them with dowries, three bags of gold, which he secretly throws in through the window at night. This is one of the best known legends about him. The resuscitation of three young boys occurs in the second play. This will be discussed in detail shortly. In the third play a non-believer entrusts his treasure to an image of Saint Nicholas. The money is stolen, later restored, and Termagant, the pagan idol, overthrown. The legend of the fourth play though less well known today was popular in its own time and is depicted on the Winchester font in a small scene. The story is concerned with the only child of Gerontius, who is captured by Arabs and later miraculously restored to his parents. The boy holding the goblet, signifying his duty as cupbearer to the King, is represented on the Winchester font, where Adeodatus lies stretched at the feet of the Bishop, who is in the act of restoring life to the three young scholars.

Albrecht, who more than any other has made an exhaustive study of the Saint Nicholas legends and iconography, admits the difficulty that faces one in trying to determine the first mention of the pickling-tub relating to the murder
of the clerks. It occurs, for instance, in a sermon "long attributed to Saint Bonaventure." On the other hand, it is not entirely unlikely that further study of the Winchester font may reveal an even earlier example antedating by several centuries the nebulous reference to the sermon. At any rate, the story was circulating at a very early date. Young quotes the short passage in which Wace, writing about 1150 A.D., records the legend of the three scholars in his *Vie de Saint Nicholas*: 27

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Trei clerch aloent a escole,
N'en ferai mie grant parole.
Lor ostes par nuit les oscit,
Lors cors muscea, l'avoir esprit;
Saint Nicholas par Deu le sout,
S'empres fu la si cum Deu plout.
Les clerch al este demanda
N'es pout muscier, si li mostra.
Saint Nicholas par sa priere
Les ames mist el cors ariere.
Par eco que as clerch fist tiel honor,
Font li clerk feste a icel sor
De bien lirre, de bien chantier,
E de miracles recitier.
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From the last four lines, as Young indicates, it appears that the tale of the three youths was well established prior to Wace’s history and that, in fact, "this account of St.

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26 Albrecht, p. 32.

27 Young, II, p. 328.
Nicholas' favour toward the *clerici* was the reason for their observing his feast-day by reading, singing and reciting his miracles.  

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26 Young, II, p. 329. See also Appendix A, *Légende de Saint Nicolas.*
Critical Evaluation

One may approach *Tres Clerici* from two directions: either as a religious art form or as a dramatic art form. Craig lists his objections to applying to the mystery plays the principles of drama as an art form by pointing out that the medieval playwright was not free to add to plots and that the plays were a "communal, anonymous, traditional drama" with predetermined subjects and with an "end and aim not dramatic but religious." Within the Fleury Playbook the variety in treatment of *Tres Clerici*, *Tres Filiae*, *Iconia de Sancti Nicolai*, and *Filius Getronis* seems to point a flexibility and freedom in choice of subject and a liberty in contriving plots.

However, to overlook either aspect is to diminish one's understanding of this form, for *Tres Clerici* is best represented as an artistic fusion of religious and dramatic art, which stems from the creative impulse of the medieval period and is a small but perfect manifestation of the same spirit. In choice of subject the writers of Fleury might freely have turned to other saints, but one senses that they eagerly preferred Nicholas as a man near to their own interests,

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29 Craig, p. 2.
30 Ibid.
a saint not through martyrdom nor through establishing a monastic order but a saint in the busy milieu of everyday life in the world — their world. The wide appeal of Treas Clerici must have won a large audience. Admitting gladly the didactic purpose and familiar content of the Fleury Playbook, one is yet fully persuaded that "competent singing and acting, accompanied by a skilful use of properties and costume, would turn any of these pieces into highly dramatic entertainment."31

31 Frank, p. 5.
PART II. VERNACULAR SAINT NICHOLAS PLAY

AND BACKGROUND: JEU DE S. NICOLAS
CHAPTER V

HISTORICAL SURVEY

The City and Changing Conditions

Northern France is the birthplace of the second play to be considered — the *Jeu de S. Nicolas* by Jean Bodel, twelfth-century trouvère and artisan of the city of Arras. Twice during the early centuries preceding the Renaissance the city had been destroyed: Attila's scourge had ripped Arras in 451 A. D., and the Northmen had leveled it in 800 A. D. From each of these disasters the city had risen and prospered again. By the time of the writing of Jean Bodel's vernacular *Jeu de S. Nicolas* Arras was already a thriving center of industry and culture, widely known for its beautiful tapestries. It may be useful to glance at some of the changing conditions that had shaped such a favorable situation: the reopening of trade, the growth of cities, the rise of universities, and the building of cathedrals.

By the first half of the tenth century Western civilization, as previously noted, had been "reduced to the verge of dissolution."¹ Fortunately, a revival of trade commenced shortly after this period, and Europe began to witness a new phenomenon.

During the course of the century "there reappeared in continental Europe a class of professional merchants whose progress, very slow at first, gathered speed as the following century moved forward." The rise in population had resulted in detaching from the land "an increasingly important number of individuals and committing them to that roving and hazardous existence" which Pirenne views with interest in his useful little volume, *Medieval Cities*. He sees that the increased population had "multiplied the crowd of vagabonds drifting about all through society" and asserts: "It is among this crowd of footloose adventurers that the first adepts of trade must, without any doubt, be looked for."

The merchants soon began setting up markets in the Forisburgus (or Faubourg). This was the outer enclosure of a fortified place. It might be a bridge-head, "a point commanding a pass through a forest or between hills or the gate of a monastery or castle." Soon small shopkeepers,

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
weavers and artisans were attracted in turn to the Faubourgs, and cities began to emerge, "haphazardly and unplanned." It is interesting to note the lessening of the feudal power and the early power of government assumed by the cities.

Pirenne maintains that by the beginning of the twelfth century, "and in some cases even by the end of the eleventh, a few cities were already in the possession of their special tribunal." The members of the tribunal in Italy, southern France and parts of Germany were named consuls. In the Netherlands, however, and in northern France they were called échevins, or aldermen. Jean Hodel refers to the échevins of Arras, as will be seen later.

The Middle Ages were noteworthy for the rise of schools and universities. Everywhere schools arose. At the Third Lateran Council in 1179 the Church had ruled "that every cathedral church should support a master to instruct ecclesiastical students, giving his services without charge to indigent scholars." The expansion of Europe's horizons had given twelfth-century man both the incentive and the leisure time for study, and although

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8 Ibid.
9 Pirenne, p. 204.
10 Ibid.
11 "Flowering of the Middle Ages," p. 32.
"learning, especially on the higher levels, was limited to a small percentage of the population, there were still thousands of poor young men who were ready to endure any hardship in order to acquire it." The comforts that surround acquiring a modern education were lacking in the medieval world. Education was undeniably hard. Today's sophisticated citizen may discover with surprise, for example, that even paper, books, and benches were scarcely existent in schools at that time and that the medieval student in his drive and thirst for knowledge was frequently forced to rely on his memory and to be satisfied with standing or squatting upon floors covered with straw. The medieval university established during the 1100's the custom of formal examinations, licensed masters, and degrees that have continued to the present time. These were the years of famous scholars when a man such as Abelard might be styled a "self-contained university," with students flocking to him from all over the world. These were the scintillating times of Abelard and Bernard's famous debates and the young days of the House of the Paraclete.

\[12\text{Ibid.}\]
\[13\text{Ibid.}\]
Saint Bernard became famous throughout Europe not only as a scholar but also as a tremendously effective preacher. In the year 1145 Bernard was preaching the second Crusade, speaking in numerous French and German cities, where he fired an intense enthusiasm for a cause doomed nevertheless to failure. It will be remembered that for political and selfish reasons the Second Crusade failed. The interest and excitement of the Crusades is frequently reflected in the play of Jean Bodel and in writings of the period, as in Rutebeuf's poems on the Crusades.

This period is further characterized by the construction of beautiful cathedrals. Among the famous cathedrals of the twelfth century are Notre Dame and Chartres. The work was begun on the choir of the highly praised Notre Dame Cathedral in 1160 and was not completed until a century later.14

14 "témoinant ainsi d'une rare continuité de vues et d'opiniâreté dans trois générations de constructeurs." Cohen, Le Grande Clarte du Moyen-Âge, p. 96.
Countless workers, unknown artists and stone masons gathered at Chartres to rebuild what had been destroyed by fire, enhancing the portals and interior with sculpture of much delicacy and beauty. Only recently of the cathedral modern investigation has looked to the period in France from 1140 to 1190 for a theory of origins for the remarkable sculpture and architecture of those years, when

Sculpture and her sister arts revive;
Stones leap'd to form, and rocks began to live.  

Whitney S. Stoddard of Harvard in a definitive study of the relationship of the west portals of the Abbey of Saint-Denis to the Royal Portal of Chartres Cathedral stresses the singular importance of the influential Abbot Suger:

When Abbot Suger dedicated the narthex of Saint-Denis on June 9, 1140, he partially realized his dream of rebuilding the Royal Abbey and unwittingly founded a new tradition. As the most powerful patron of the twelfth century, Suger had at his command the personal prestige, political influence, and financial support to utilize the artistic talents of the best craftsmen in western Europe. With Suger's dedication the whole course of sculpture changed direction.

Romanesque art in France "coincides chronologically with the first appearance of a literature written in the young vernacular." 17 One may even say that one of the purposes of the chansons de geste was to attract pilgrims to famous shrines, 18 for it is particularly in this form that we see how closely allied in motive and concept are the French epics and the Romanesque cathedrals. A recent critic states that "the epics in their motives and concepts of form are witnesses of the same Romanesque art as are the shrines themselves." 19 If we seek to define the relationship further, we discover that the bond between the Romanesque art and the literature of the period "comes from the fact that in their approach to the Divine they both emphasize the majesty of God, and in their approach to the human they confine themselves to the typical." 20

This attitude is revealed by Jean Bodel, lyric and epic writer, an accomplished poet of Arras and author of the vernacular play, Jeu de S. Nicolas. In the play, which is still within the liturgical tradition and presumably meant to be performed as part of the religious celebration for the feast of St. Nicholas, the reverence for the Christian faith

17 Hatzfeld, p. 3.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
underlies the whole drama but is hidden for the most part. Instead the poet has emphasized the human and typical by building his plot around a band of thieves. Cliquet, Rasoir, and Pincédé have far more importance in the unfolding of the story than the Christians or the Oriental Emirs. Indeed, one sometimes looks for the appearance of a Christian, and then, when in a brief instance Bodel permits our attention to turn to one of the faithful, we find him on his knees. There is a certain power and poignancy in what has been left unsaid. However, we are grateful that the author did select shrewd and realistic thugs for the main parts because it is precisely in this that we find high value of entertainment.

In the poet's colorful life there are all the dramatic elements of a moving tragedy. Born in Arras, Bodel's life was so much a part of the trouvére tradition that in considering his literary activity, expecting for the moment his superior genius, we find ourselves in the midst of "an unfailing supply of public singers, jongleurs of the higher type, who moved about in these two countries." France and England at this time used the same language and "were bound by such close ties in the twelfth century that we must consider their literature together." Then, too, many of these minstrels were "celtics who sang in French." The trouvére,

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
according to Holzknecht, represents a type of singer "more dignified by far than the common jongleur, but still not yet stationary enough to be called patronized artists in the real sense."24 In Bodel one sees one, who to all appearances loved to sing and who apparently had the esteem and support of his culturally minded city and confreres. Arras is one of the first cities mentioned as having puyas, societies which sponsored literary activity and "encouraged the art of poetry by crowning the victors in poetic contests held according to their own rules."25 Members were usually drawn from the clergy, officials, and bourgeois. Prizes were awarded, and poets competed in chants royaux, ballades, rondeaux, virelais, chansons, and even Latin epigrams. The puy continued long after the Middle Ages. We have a record, for example, of a puy in Rouen in 1515 under the patronage of the Carmelites and probably differing very little in spirit from the earlier group to which Bodel may have belonged. In the sixteenth-century puy at Rouen the group had grown in number until a larger place was needed for their meetings. "At first the solemnities connected with the puy were held in the cloister, a large, beautiful room, where several guilds held their sessions."26 Later the puy met in the refectory.

24Karl Julius Holzknecht, Literary Patronage in the Middle Ages (Philadelphia: 1923), p. 36.


26Ibid., p. 217.
Such groups annually had a Mass offered on a set day when all the members attended. Usually the church or chapel choir was splendidly decorated for the occasion with candles, bouquets, and tapestry. Very often the group paid special devotion in honor of a candle that represented their group. In medieval England, for instance, if a member of the guild failed to attend the yearly Mass, he was subject to a fine. The statutes read that "he shall pay a penny to the light." Bodel belonged to a Confraternity of the Candle in Arras. Most of our knowledge of the poet's life derives either from his own works or from the register of the Confrérie de la Chandelle, which indicates his calling as an artesien and records the date of his death.

He was an ambitious poet, writing four or five pastourelles and an epic, Chanson des Saiens, a poem about the Saxons which a later poet praised for "its langue polie, its bel savoir, and science acquise." It is his Congé, however, for which Bodel is most famous and for which he is most affectionately remembered. The poem is a tender farewell to his fellow townsman and friends written "after leprosy had cut short his career and prevented a contemplated journey to the Holy Land." Miss Frank writes that "his

28 Frank, p. 96.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
lyrics reflect a personal note, especially the pathetic Gondé, and his epic indicates a desire to renew and refine that form of poetry." Bodel seems to have held some post in Arras, for in his poem, the Gondé, he addresses the city's officers and "mentions being in their service; he also refers familiarly to many of its citizens." A personal note is felt in the lines in the Gondé in which the poet expressly takes leave of the candle. The Confrérie de la Ste Chandelle was a "société des jongleurs et des bourgeois d'Arras" who acted as custodian of a candle that had miraculously appeared to one of their members as he knelt at the altar. Bodel bids farewell to the candle, "which Notre Dame gave to the jongleurs and to the mendicant, doux compaixnon, (sic) who have been kinder than brothers to him." His contemporaries and successors frequently refer to Bodel, suggesting a wide popularity for the poet, but even in his own work a hint of his popularity "emerges indirectly from the gentle spirit of his Gondé, its absence of rancour, and the way in which he address his friends and colleagues there." He retired to a leper hospital outside the city in 1202 and died in the winter of 1209-10.

31 Frank, pp. 96, 97.
32 Ibid., p. 97.
33 Ibid. 34 Ibid. 35 Ibid.
CHAPTER VI

FORM

The Music

In form the Jeu de S. Nicolas is music drama. To approach a study of the play without some notion of its music would be similar to contenting oneself with the libretto of Mozart or Menotti; here, however, the music is not modern. The Jeu de S. Nicolas like the twelfth-century Beauvais play of Daniel, recently revived, combines dramatic instinct with music. Referring to the strange mixture of East and West in the music, an eminent music critic, Paul Henry Lang, comments: "Thus Europe and Asia were united." It was, he continues, "real theater, the first European theater, but it was also real music drama, for the expressive qualities of music were exploited."  

1 The Play of Daniel was presented in New York for Christmas, 1955, in what was probably its first performance since the Middle Ages. The play was performed by the New York Pro Musica under Noah Greenberg, Director, and has been repeated each Christmas season since 1958. This summer of 1960 the same group will tour Europe with the Beauvais play, sponsored by ANTA.

2 The Play of Daniel, a recording by Decca with introductory notes by Paul Henry Lang, Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., and a free verse adaptation by W. H. Auden. Decca Record DL 9402. Lang, p.3.

3 Ibid.
The expressive qualities of music were used for both religious and dramatic ends. The writers, musicians, and artists of the medieval world realized as the ancient Greeks had realized before that "pour émouvoir la foule, la poésie devait être soutenue par une mélodie."^4 Lote's thorough and exhaustive work on the history of French verse concludes that this conception of music survived all during the Middle Ages, "car là déclamation privée du secours de la musique n'y a jamais été très en faveur."^5 So we find that still at the time of Bodel's play, "wherever we look... all is under the profound influence of Gregorian chant."^6

Smits van Waesberghe examines a series of musical treatises dating from about 1050 and extending through the twelfth century.^7 He finds that the authors of the medieval treatises seem strongly influenced by a determination to continue in the line of their predecessors. This tendency is very pronounced — "too conspicuous to be dismissed."^8 "It is well known," he writes, "that on Mediaeval schools tradition had a strong hold; and the connection between new and old

^5Ibid.
^6Lang, Daniel, p. 3.
is clearly traceable in the treatises used and the methods followed by successive teachers of the same scholastic subject — far more so than is the case with modern schools."

The famous music scholar considers the treatises under review as clearly having originated "as a series of college-lectures on the Ars musica at some important school" and as of interest in representing prevailing ideas about music contemporary with Bodel's ingenious Jeu de S. Nicholas.

This attitude towards music was found also in the monasteries. There is a manuscript of St. Gall, Institute Patrum de modo psallendi, which contains a "longwinded" defense of the old style in the face of innovations in singing the psalms. The medieval writer refers to the days of the first fervor when the monastery was in the vigor of its youth and the monks were spoken of as angeli. Now he complains that the new members despise the old ways of singing and try to sing not "in religious gravity but histriornum more." (How strong are these low historicom ways in Jeu de S. Nicolas!) The unhappy monk continues that the disturbing members are "full of trifling songs (neniae) and foreign melodies" and that they seem to want to practice what they have heard and seen abroad. Van Dijk notes "the older generation may have been unable to digest the new

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9Ibid., p. 25. 10Ibid., p. 27.
13Ibid., pp. 101-102.
and complex sounds: their ears tingled with them, even in England, where Aelred, abbot of Rievaulx, inveighed against the same things." Van Dijk assumes that it was the first time in the West that the music of the Church was influenced by secular chant, "and, of course, many were shocked."  

THE DRAMA

In considering the play itself, we find that although the \textit{Jeu de S. Nicolas} is the earliest surviving play of its type in French, it is "perhaps the most remarkable of all." A distinct literary shift had occurred over the centuries. England and Ireland no longer maintained the cultural heights of previous years. The period of the Danes marked a decline in British and Irish ascendancy, and literacy superiority was considered as having passed to the French. By the time of the Fleury Playbook we had come to French liturgical plays revealing what "sophisticated writers would do to adapt and extend traditional material." \textit{Tres Clerici} like the early Romanesque art had a stiffness about it, yet this stiffness was "both a restricting element and a part of the beauty." By the end the twelfth century when Bodel's play was written, art and literature had become "dynamic, enlivened, graceful, elegant, feminine, more secular." \textit{Jeu de S. Nicolas} is very much a part of this "emotional-dynamic approach to a symbolic world." 

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Ibid., p. 102} \footnote{Ibid.} \footnote{Frank, p. 95.} \footnote{Ibid., p. 44.} \footnote{Hatzfeld, \textit{Literature Through Art}, p. 13.} \footnote{Ibid.} \footnote{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
The freedom, simplicity, and vigor of young and exuberant talent in the *Jeu de S. Nicolas* exactly coincides with the medieval creative impulse to take in with youthful eyes and "unite in artistic entity as many parts as is psychologically possible." Bodel takes an old legend, models it on a play of Hilary, and makes exciting changes. Instead of an infidel, Judeus, sometimes called Barbarus, who hears of the miracles performed by Saint Nicholas and decides to place his treasures in safe-keeping by putting his wealth before an image of the saint, Bodel raises the lowly Barbarus to the status of a pagan king and surrounds him with "an obsequious Seneschal" and a colorful retinue of Emirs from the East. The pagans far outnumber the Christians and defeat them in battle. One Christian survives — Preudom. It is he who converses with an angel and eventually effects the conversion of the pagans following the saint's miracle. Bodel employs the saint's image of the pagan god Tervagan. He instills something of the fervor of the Crusades, but his most successful and original contribution is his introduction of scenes and characters of low life.

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23 Petit de Julleville, II, p. 222, "Mais Jean Bodel a beaucoup développé la donnée légendaire. Il paraît ne devoir qu'à son imagination l'épisode des chrétiens aux prises avec les musulmans, et les scènes de cabaret qu'il a detaillées avec complaisance."

24 Frank, p. 98.
The three thieves drink, gamble, and quarrel in a tavern kept by a grasping host and his rascally servant-boy. Here come criers of town and King and a messenger who joins in the drinking, gambling, and quarrelling. All these people are pure Artois; indeed there is no desire to hide the fact; their tipple is the good wine of Auxerre, they observe the contemporary division of Arras into cite and vile, they mention such nearby towns as Henin, Fresnes-les-Montauban, Gavrelle.

Craig maintains that the medieval miracle and mystery plays were intended"to appeal to the mind and heart of the sinner as well as the man of God, and to do so immediately."26 Few of the later miracle plays rival Jeu de S. Nicolas in immediacy of appeal.

VERSIFICATION28

Jean Bodel displays more "artistry and technical skill"29 in his versification than any of his dramatic predecessors. His dialogue is swift, natural and realistic, and his lines reveal a flexible spirit of experimentation. We find in the Jeu de S. Nicolas a courageous willingness to oppose the firmly established laws of French verse by daring in the first place to vary the almost rigidly accepted pattern

26Craig, pp. 3, 4.
29Frank, p. 104.
of cesura and rime. Professor Lote informs us that there were two genres for which the changing of the meter had become almost sacred by usage.\textsuperscript{30} Bodel shows great skill at times in varying his meter and line. Although the play is mainly written in octosyllabic lines, there are three passages in which the ten-syllable lines are employed, with the $6 + 4$ cesura.

\begin{lyxcode}
S'aies saint Nicolas — en remembranche
Ne te couvient avoir — nule dquitanche
Sains Nicolaaspourcache — ta délivranchae.
Se tu l'as bien servi — de si a cre,
Ne te recroire mie, — mais serf encore ... 
\end{lyxcode}

This irregular form was not in favor. The \textit{Leys d'Amors}, for example, vetoed its use, arguing that it must never be used as the form was neither harmonious nor agreeable nor pleasing if the cesura were changed:

\begin{lyxcode}
Il faut observer que dans les vers de dix syllabes, le répos est à la quatrième syllabe, et qu'on ne doit jamais changer cette mesure; c'est-à-dire qu'il ne faut jamais placer le repos à la sixième syllabe, au lieu de la quatrième; car cela n'est pas harmonieux... On voit, en effet, que les vers de cette mesure n'ont pas une cadence agréable; et nous n'avons jamais vu qu'on s'en soit servi: c'est pourquoi nous ne l'approuvons pas.
\end{lyxcode}

Jean Bodel was not a poet to be deterred by such restrictions. The decasyllabic line was one of the types \textit{les plus courants} in the Middle Ages. In the vernacular it was almost contemporary with the octosyllabic form and

\textsuperscript{30}Lote, II, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{31}Lote, I, p. 220.
reigned as master in the epic poem, "où il s'établit presque exclusivement, pour une durée d'un siècle et demi à deux siècles, dès la Chanson de Roland." From there it spread to lyric poetry but only in rare instances to the drama. Almost without exception the cesura remained fixed on the fourth syllable. Against such opposition one admires Jean Bodel's display of versatility.

In his occasional use of the alexandrine Bodel is a forerunner of later medieval poets. Bodel employs it to denote dignity in his characters. When the king, the seneschal or the angel speak, the alexandrine is used. By the second half of the thirteenth century the alexandrine had gained ground in epic poetry, but it was to triumph anew in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, "ou il devient en quelque sorte le vers par excellence et où il reçoit le nom de 'vers commun.'" Thus we see how far in advance of his age Bodel was when he wrote in the alexandrine.

In his use of assonance and rhyme Bodel, as Lote is forced to acknowledge, was "aussi peu scrupuleux." In Jeu de S. Nicolas one finds: pec : mer; voirre : candoille; and rouge : angouche. Bodel and other poets began to experiment more and more in a wider variety of rhyme scheme although the pattern aabaabbbabba continued persistently.

32 Lote, II, p. 57.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., p. 100.
Chambers traces the way by which "the strict ecclesiastical Latin was gradually invaded by elements of the vernacular." He notes that many of the Easter plays from Germany end with a hymn Christ ist erstanden to be sung by the congregation. By the time of Hilary, "one of those nebulous wandering scholars and an erstwhile pupil of Abelard," a widening breach between secular and liturgical tone is apparent. An air of freedom, a spirit of roving laxity, had been introduced as a feature of medieval life. Golliards roamed the country, and Hilary seems to have been associated with a monastery on somewhat loose terms, being sometimes in and sometimes out. Hilary and other writers of his age "were fond of glossing their Latin speeches with paraphrases or even substantial additions in German or French." The Beauvais Play of Daniel, like the Jeu de S. Nicolas, follows the basic outlines of a play by Hilary but "shows great advancement in metrical subtility." Jeu de S. Nicolas shows even greater advancement in language, for it is entirely in the vernacular. The Beauvais Daniel

35 Chambers, English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages, p. 9.
36 Weakland, Daniel, p. 4.
37 Chambers, English Literature, p. 9.
38 Weakland, Daniel, p. 4.
is in Latin, and Hilary's play, *Iconia de Sancti Nicolai*, is written by and large in Latin, although the author makes use of refrains in French.

This practice was widespread, for the drama of medieval France exhibited "certain stylistic devices common to all writing of the Middle Ages designed for oral presentation." The drama shared with the *chansons de geste* and the romances "the repetitive phrase intended to aid memory and awaken recognition." The refrain in serious plays could be extremely effective. There "such recurring words could also be used as drumbeats to heighten emotion, whereas is the farces and sotties they served to underscore humorous lines (often in differing contexts) and nudge an audience into cumulative laughter." Holmes enlightens us further by pointing out that it was not uncommon to find instances from the Mass for a certain day, such as that used on the December 26 for the feast of Saint Stephen, "where each Latin verse of the epistle is followed by one of more strophes in French, giving a free translation." This practice, he assures us, was not at all infrequent. "The few lines of vernacular which were inserted made it possible to hold the attention

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39 Frank, p. 268.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
of the laity, even when they were nothing but a refrain."\(^{43}\)

Jeu de S. Nicolas is the first instance of a French play completely in the vernacular. It is written in the Picard dialect.

\(^{43}\)Ibid.
Critical Evaluation

To appreciate fully the dramatic achievement of *Jeu de S. Nicholas*, it is necessary to reflect that the dramatic skill of Bodel's well contrived play is without precedent in the theatre of his day. As Chambers comments, it is "rare to find in a medieval writer any consciousness of an analogy between classical drama and the performances familiar to him in his own day." \(^5\) (The very word *drama*, he reminds us, was not an English word, at least, until the sixteenth century.)

Bodel wrote from his own original genius, giving the dialogue a realistic treatment keyed to everyday life in Arras; on the other hand, in one instance Bodel employs a classical feature in his use of the prologue. An earlier attempt at a Christian drama may be seen in the plays of Hrotsvitha, a German nun of the tenth century, yet from the point of view of living drama, there is scarcely any similarity between Hrotsvitha's work and Bodel's play. \(^6\) However, the nun's plays afford an interesting contrast to Bodel's *Jeu de S. Nicholas*. In structure, in purpose and in tone Hrotsvitha's plays provide a direct antithesis to Bodel's entertaining *Jeu de S. Nicholas*. Her plays are in Latin and are modelled upon Terence and

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\(^5\) Chambers, *English Literature*, p. 2.

\(^6\) See Young, I, p. 5.
Plautus; their purpose is to extol the martyrs and to praise the virtue of chastity; the tone is moral — at rare times even playful — and seems to have been intended for a select audience. On the other hand, Bodel's structure follows a spontaneous development that accompanied the early literary activity of the Middle Ages, when a gradual exploitation of incorporating more and more scenes within a single drama took place. In the prologue to *Jeu de S. Nicolas* the speaker announces to the men and women that the play is being given on the eve of the feast of Saint Nicholas, "*Del saint dont annuit est la vielle,*" that is, the night of December 5th. Its purpose seems to have been to surround a well known miracle of Saint Nicholas with a lively tale; it appeals to a wide audience. It is true that in a comic sense Bodel's twelfth-century play deals with the theme of repentance, but the treatment differs widely from Hrotsvitha's tenth-century dramas. Bodel creates universal characters, thieves brought to life, quarrelling, drinking, stealing; Hrotsvitha — and her accomplishment is much to her credit, writing as she did at a time of literary dearth—centers her attention upon the abstract, upon the virtue exemplified in the lives of Mary of Egypt, of the martyr Faith and her sisters, and of other Christian heroes. Hrotsvitha's plays seem to have been intended for reading, Bodel's for singing and acting. His, though less serious in tone, intended as part of a liturgical service.
Finally, one may consider Bodel's play as a skillful comedy of high quality as well as a religious drama. It is an early and successful instance of the taste for the comic which became increasingly popular in France. In Gustave Cohen's judgment, *Jeu de S. Nicolas* is an excellent example "de cette littérature artésienne si brillante" which Adam de la Hale, writing fifty years after Jean Bodel, was to enrich with two other masterpieces, *Robin and Marion*, and *Jeu de la Feuille", "mais appartenant exclusivement au genre comique."  

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2 Ibid.
APPENDIX A

An amusing version of the Saint Nicholas and the three little scholars has continued down to present times in a popular French song collected by the poet, Gerard de Nerval.¹

**LEGENDE DE SAINT NICOLAS**

 Ils étaient trois petits enfants
Qui s'en allaient glaner aux champs.

S'en vont un soir chez un boucher :
"Boucher, voudrais-tu nous loger?
-- Entrez, entrez, petits enfants,
Y a d'la place assurément.

Ils étaient trois petits enfants
Qui s'en allaient glaner aux champs.

Ils n'étaient pas sitôt entrés
Que le boucher les a tués,
Les a coupés en p'tits morceaux,
Mis au saloir comme porceaux.

Ils étaient trois petits enfants
Qui s'en allaient glaner aux champs

Saint-Nicolas au bout d'sept ans
Vint à passer dedans ce champ,
Il s'en alla chez le boucher :
"Boucher, voudrais-tu me loger?"

Ils étaient trois petits enfants
Qui s'en allaient glaner aux champs.

"Entrez, entres, saint Nicolas:
Y a d'la place, il n'en manque pas."
Il n'était pas sitôt entré
Qu'il a demandé à manger.

Ils étaient trois petits enfants
Qui s'en allaient glaner aux champs.

"Du p'tit salé je veux avoir
Qu'il y a sept ans qu'est dans l'saloir;
Quand le boucher entendit ça,
Hors de sa porte il s'envuya...

Ils étaient trois petits enfants
Qui s'en allaient glaner aux champs.

"Boucher, boucher, ne t'enfuis pas!
Repens-toi. Dieu te pardonnera....
Saint Nicolas alla s'asseoir
Dessus le bord de ce saloir:

Ils étaient trois petits enfants
Qui s'en allaient glaner aux champs.

"Petits enfants qui dormez là,
Je suis le grand saint Nicolas....
Et le saint étendit trois doigts.
Les p'tits se relèvent tous les trois....

Ils étaient trois petits enfants
Qui s'en allaient glaner aux champs.

Le premier dit: "J'ai bien dormi...
--Et moi, dit le second, aussi."
Et le troisième répondit:
"Je croyais être en paradis...."

Ils étaient trois petits enfants
Qui s'en allaient glaner aux champs.
APPENDIX B

Recent Saint Nicholas Play

A direct descendant of the comic Saint Nicholas play is found in Henri Gheon's popular "L'Impromptu du Charcutier," recently finding a wide audience in the United States under the title, The Sausage Maker's Interlude. In this farce Saint Nicholas appears in his historical role as Bishop of Myra and not in disguise. Finding that the youths have found their way into the Sausage Maker's machine, before restoring them to life the saint frightens the man and his wife by inquiring whether mechanical science might reverse its process so that what had gone in could come back in its original form.

Gheon, as seen above, retains the characters of the Bishop, the man, the wife, and the three youths. He has increased dramatic suspense by introducing a large wheel as a symbol of man's greed. At one point in the play, Creon, the husband, cries that he is no longer "a knife-grinding pork-butcher, who produces to earn; I earn, now, to produce, to

make the machine turn, to make the machine live and turn, faster and faster, more and more; to buy other machines to make them turn and live."

Somber as this aspect of competition may seem, the wheel symbolizes also the fair, or the happy periods of life between wars and man's wholesale slaughter. Indeed, The Interlude opens with music of a country fair, while the Property Man invites the audience to "three miles of it, fried fish, peppermint drops," mingling items familiarly associated with circuses with items such as sea-monsters, cornets, organs--and passions. The scene is one of false appearances and of agitation. "The trampling of the city people and the country folk raises such a thick dust that it blots out the sun."

The dominant note, however, is one of hope. Just as the medieval audience could enjoy the episode of the three little clerks' being cut up, knowing that at the proper moment the hand of the Bishop would be extended in blessing and the boys would be revived, so Gheon's Saint Nicholas play seeks to instill in the modern audience an invincible confidence that God's power through the instrument of His saints is sufficient to prevent the threat that when the fair is over the "machine which no longer turns but which was created to turn, will be put in motion."
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