

MARY OF NEMEGEN, LAWRENCE CLOPPER AND THE ENGLISH SAINT PLAY

In his interlinked studies 'Communitas: The Play of Saints in Late Medieval and Tudor England' and Drama, Play and Game, Lawrence Clopper has mounted a direct challenge to received ideas on early English drama.¹ Against the traditional view of E.K. Chambers and Alfred Pollard, which claims that saint plays were the 'leading and characteristic type of mediaeval drama', and a key phase in the 'transformation of the medieval into the humanist type of drama', Clopper has argued that dramatised vitae and miracles were not in fact widely known in England.² The assumption that such plays were performed is for Clopper the result of misreading parish and civic records, which mostly describe 'ales and somergames, all of which took place on saints' or other feast days'. Clopper lays out his position as follows: 'We have lumped together a variety of lay and clerical activities held on saints' feast days as saint plays when the records cannot support the contention that they are enactments of the vita of a saint...I remain skeptical that there were many saint plays in England from the later medieval period to the Reformation'.³

These proposals have provoked some strong opposition. From Clifford Davidson's sustained defence of 'the saint play as a popular genre', to slightly more muted critiques by Neil Cartlidge, Bruce Holsinger and Janette Dillon, several objections have been raised against Clopper's theses.⁴ However, there may be a further piece of evidence to corroborate Clopper's views, outside the accounts and other documentary sources he analyses. In c.1518 the Antwerp printer Jan van Doesborch printed the chapbook Mary of Nmegen, one of about twenty texts he produced for the English

¹ Lawrence M. Clopper, 'Communitas: The Play of Saints in Late Medieval and Tudor England', Mediaevalia 18 (1995), pp.81-109; Lawrence Clopper, Drama, Play and Game: English festive culture in the medieval and early modern period (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), 108-37.

² E.K. Chambers, The Medieval Stage, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1903), II, 149.

³ Clopper, Drama, Play and Game, 128.

⁴ Clifford Davidson, 'British Saint Play Records: Coping with Ambiguity', Early Theatre 2 (1999), 97-106; Clifford Davidson, 'Saint Plays and Pageants of Medieval Britain', Early Drama, Art and Music Newsletter 22 (1999), 11-37; Neil Cartlidge, 'The Unknown Pilgrim', in Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-century Holy Woman, ed. Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (London: Routledge, 2004), 97; Bruce W. Holsinger, 'Analytical Survey 6: Medieval Literature and Cultures of Performance', in New Medieval Literatures VI, ed. David Lawton, Wendy Scase and Rita Copeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 296-7; Janette Dillon, The Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 237.

market.⁵ This is often considered a sort of ‘female Faustus’: its heroine Mary becomes ‘paramoure’ to the devil for seven years, only leaving his service after witnessing a play of the Virgin at Guelders.⁶ What makes the text relevant to Clopper’s work is its apparent provenance in Dutch rederijker drama. It is related to the play Een seer wonderlijcke Historie van Mariken van nieumeghen, which survives in a pirated, partly summarised edition of c.1515.⁷ The Mariken might well be the direct source of Mary: Claire Sponsler, for instance, argues that the English text should be considered ‘a reading version of the enacted play’, an extended précis of the events it portrays.⁸ However, the text itself is strikingly reticent about its origins. Not only is it written in prose throughout, but its title-page and colophon make no mention of any drama, simply describing the text as a ‘lyttell story’ or ‘lyttel treatyse’. This silence even extends to the play mentioned within the text. The Dutch Mariken incorporates a full play-within-a-play at this point, the so-called ‘Spel van Masscheroen’, in which Our Lady contends with a demon for the souls of humankind. The English text, however, gives only a sketchy account. It merely alludes to a ‘playe...of synfull lyuyng’ and ‘a play that is wont euery yere to be played’, without any reference to specific content. In short, Van Doesborch’s version of the text disregards its theatricality. For Van Doesborch, adapting the Mariken for an English audience involved suppressing its dramatic origins.

It should be noted that this move is by no means typical. Other printers preparing Dutch texts for the English market did not think similar measures necessary. The publication of Everyman at least three years before Mary testifies to this fact. As is well known, Everyman was most likely derived from the Dutch play Den Spyeghel der Salicheyt van Elckerlijc, written shortly before 1496.⁹ While Everyman was also designated ‘a treatyse’ in its English version, it was otherwise unchanged: it retains its division into speaking parts, and is openly styled ‘a morall playe’ in its two surviving

⁵ Mary of Nemmegen, ed. Margaret M. Raftery, Medieval and Renaissance Texts 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

⁶ Jeffrey Burton Russell, Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 59.

⁷ Mariken van Nieumeghen: A Bilingual Edition, ed. and trans. Therese Decker and Martin W. Walsh (Columbia: Camden House, 1994).

⁸ Claire Sponsler, Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods and Theatricality in Late Medieval England (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), 96.

⁹ Everyman and Its Dutch Original, Elckerlijc, ed. Clifford Davidson, Martin W. Walsh and Ton J. Broos, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007).

full editions. Van Doesborch was probably aware of the English Everyman. He had been involved in the English book-trade from at least 1505, and it is possible that the text was translated by Lawrence Andrewe, his collaborator on several works.¹⁰ At any rate, Everyman shows that Van Doesborch's publication of a prose Mary was not part of a general policy towards printing drama. His belief that Mary would fare better as a prose narrative stems from some more specific quality in the text.

Clopper's work might explain Van Doesborch's treatment of Mary. If, as Clopper states, the saint play was little known in England, this would account for his systematic removal of dramatic elements from the tract. Although the Mariken does not strictly recount the vita of a saint, since Mary (if she ever existed) was never canonised, the work does resemble at least one established subgenre of the saint play: it is equally classifiable as a conversion narrative or 'a Marian miracle play'.¹¹ Van Doesborch would obviously not wish to print a work which might alienate potential buyers, and Benjamin Schmidt has shown that he carefully tailored his English books to appeal as fully as possible to his audience.¹² The publication of a prose Mary may be an attempt to accommodate English readers, changing the text from a little-known form into one more familiar to its intended public. Everyman did not require similar revisions because its form was widely recognised in England: English familiarity with the form of the Mariken, however, could not be relied on. In short, Van Doesborch's alteration of the Mariken might offer some confirmation of Clopper's views. At the very least, it suggests that the printer was unsure of the prevalence of the saint play in England, and rearranged his text accordingly. For this early modern witness, the tradition of the English saint play appeared either weak or non-existent.

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¹⁰ Everyman, ed. A.C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), xiii.

¹¹ Lynette Muir, Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and Their Legacy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61. On the scarcity of these types of play in England, see Clopper, Drama, Play and Game, 299-306.

¹² Benjamin Schmidt, Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World, 1570-1670 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14.