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Early Drama, Art, and Music. 10.

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Liturgy and Drama at St-Omer in the Thirteenth through Sixteenth Centuries

Lynette R. Muir

The *Rituale* of the church at St-Omer was described and partially transcribed by Deschamps de Pas in 1886 in the *Mémoires de la Société des Antiquaires de la Morinie*.¹ Since the material is both interesting and virtually unknown, I have selected from de Pas's extensive transcription and commentary the most significant details of the ceremonies practiced at the end of the thirteenth century in the collegiate church of St-Omer in the town of the same name in northern France, a location not far from a group of towns well known in medieval drama: Arras, Mons, Lille, and Valenciennes.

The church of St-Omer was collegiate, not monastic, and included a choir school (there are references to the boys, the school premises, and the schoolmaster), so it is not surprising that the ceremonies prescribed for the feasts of St. Nicholas, Holy Innocents, and Epiphany indicate a special role for the boys. On Holy Innocents Day, for example, the Epistle “may be sung, if it is so wished, with its ‘farce’ by two or four boys” (*vel si placet cantatur cum sua farsina a duobus pueris vel quatuor* [145]). The Gospel on that day may be sung either by a deacon “or if it is so wished by a boy” (*vel si placet a puero*). There was also apparently a boy bishop at this feast,² though the actual reference is missing (the manuscript has a number of

¹ Deschamps de Pas, “Les Cérémonies religieuses dans la collégiale de Saint-Omer au XIII^e siècle: Examen d’un rituel manuscrit de cette église,” *Mémoires de la Société des Antiquaires de la Morinie* 20 (1886–87): 97–221. The editor first describes the content of the manuscript, and then gives extensive extracts from it in the original Latin. References to this article appear in my text in parentheses.

² For the celebrations of the boy bishop and the Feast of Fools, see Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933): 1:104–II. [The most recent scholarship on the Feast of Fools is represented by Max Harris, *Sacred Folly: A New History of the Feast of Fools* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 145–47, 220, 225, 260.—Editor].

lacunae from wear), and the same was true of the Feast of the Circumcision when it was the turn of the choirmen to have their bishop (*vicarii ceterique clerici chorum frequentantes et eorum episcopus se habeant* [147]) “as it is described above for the Feast of the Holy Innocents”: and it shall be as for the Feast of Fools (*festum fatuorum*), and it shall be sung “even with howling [*etiam ullulando*].”³ A number of references in the fifteenth-century financial accounts of the church⁴ also mention the boy bishop of the Innocents and the bishop of fools as two different people and ordain that “to meet the expenses of sustaining their office in their feast they shall receive the full portion customarily given to other prelates in similar cases” (*in eorum festo percipient plenam porcionem solitam dare aliis prelati in causa pari* [104]).

The church was closely allied to the town, and many feast days involved processions to other locations in the neighborhood, provided that the weather permitted. On Palm Sunday three alternative routes are possible: “If the weather is fine” (*si pulchrum tempus fuerit* [157]), they go to a chapel of the Holy Cross outside the town, but if the “path leading to the Holy Cross is muddy and the weather rainy” (*via qui ducit ad sanctam crucem lutosa et tempus pluviosum*) they may go to the chapel of St. Denis. Further, if it is very wet “and it does not seem to the canons expedient that the procession should go outside the church” (*et non videatur dominis expedire quod processio exeat ecclesiam* [159]) a processional route through the cloisters is prescribed. The reason for this concern with the weather may have been a desire to protect their best gold copes. On the feast of the Purification the choir members should wear their black woolen choir mantles in spite of the importance of the feast “lest the gold and silk copes should be stained” (*ne cape auree et serice maculantur* [189]), presumably by the grease from the

³ [On *ullulando* see, however, Harris, *Sacred Folly*, 146–47.—Editor]

⁴ The financial accounts of the St-Omer church are quoted by de Pas.

candles they are all carrying. Similar care for these vestments is shown on the feast of their patron St. Omer (9 September), for “if it be fine” (*nisi pluvis impedierit*) they go outside the town to a small chapel where the reliquary of St. Omer is displayed for veneration, which must be in an orderly fashion lest the copes and ornaments be damaged or stained “by the narrowness of the place and the jostling” (*artum locum et collisionem* [200]) .

The canons took great care of their church fabric and ornaments as well as their vestments. Many references in the accounts are for repair or maintenance. An agreement was made with a local painter for a period of six years to refurbish the *arbre*, the tree-carved candlestick for the paschal candle. It is worth quoting this early “maintenance contract” in full:

Agreement was made with Jehan de Ducquerque, painter, in the presence of the Dean and of Master Hughes de Mouchy, to make [*faire*] the paschal tree [*arbre pasqual*] for the period of six years, and he should do it so well and adequately that the said tree will not need doing more than once in every two years if the Chapter desires it. And for this first year, beginning at Easter 1480, it has been completely renewed, for which he shall have 100 sous cash [*courants?*] whereas before they paid £6 a year. And the other years, two by two, when he renews it, he shall have only £4 cash [*courants*], and for the other years when he only sets it up [*rassir?*] he shall only have for his trouble and the help of his assistant 12s. (120)

The canons seem to have got a bargain.

A number of references to the work of the carpenter suggest that he was a permanent employee, for he prepares the wires (*funibus* [128]) for the dove at Pentecost: “and then the dove is sent down as is the custom” (185); on St. Omer’s day he must hang up the dove in its gold crown and leave it up for the whole octave. This task is *officium carpenterii* (“The carpenter’s job” [199]). There were two feasts of St. Omer, and for the second, known in the fifteenth century as the “feast of St. Omer in flowers” and commemorating the translation of the relics, there was traditionally a picture, made in flowers, of the saint lying among them, just the head

and hands showing. The head and hands were probably made of wood; there was a wooden head with a mitre in the cupboard of the church, de Pas tells us, when he was writing his article (138). Many entries in the accounts over the years refer to this picture, including payment to painters for the “cloth,” which seems to have been a pattern (*patron*) for the picture. Women collected the flowers: six of them worked for three days in 1477 and were paid a total of 18 sous. In 1520, the cloth had to be completely renewed, and a woman was paid two sous for hemming the eight ells of material which cost two sous an ell. Robert the painter who *fait l’image de St Omer* received 40 sous (138). The *Rituale* itself, however, does not mention anything about the image or the flowers.

Townsmen were sometimes involved in the ceremonies of the church at St-Omer. They carried the banners and the dragon, which symbolized the devil, in the Rogation Day procession and the same a few days later at Ascension, when the dragon was carried at the back of the procession—a sign that he had been defeated by prayers made on the preceding days, as indicated by Durandus’s *Rationale divinatorum officiorum*.⁵ In 1407, 9d was paid for a pole to carry the dragon. The accounts tell us also of the greenery which decorated the church at Whitsuntide. In 1456, Colart Beliquet was paid 3d for fetching it “because the abbot did not want the school children to go as had been the custom” (127). (Sometimes grass was scattered in the choir, and in 1483 15d was allocated for this purpose.) From a dramatic point of view it is particularly interesting to note the entry referring to painted cloths representing clouds which were hung with the greenery, as is indicated by this entry for 1395: “for the cords with which the branches together with the clouds were hung up on the Vigil of Pentecost” (*Pro cordis quibus rami cum nebulis appensi fuerunt in vigilia Pentecostes* (128).

⁵ Lib. 6, cap. 102; cited by de Pas, 126–27.

The *Rituale* also describes the participation of the townsfolk on Maundy Thursday in a ceremony which is closer to being drama than anything we have so far considered. After the traditional washing of the feet of the poor in the morning, the canons, accompanied by the other clergy and some of the more important townsmen (*burgenses aliqui de majoribus*) go after dinner in procession to the school buildings (*scolas*) where they sit down at prepared tables. After psalms have been sung (without repetitions as they have neither psalters nor neums), a sermon is sung; then some of the senior canons, girt with towels, wash the feet of any who will permit it (*illis qui permittere volunt*). After a sermon in Latin, bread and wine are distributed, and other readings and psalms follow with the reader finally saying: “Arise, let us go hence” (165–66). Then they all leave but not in procession. The attempt to re-enact the Last Supper is obvious.

Symbolic dramatic actions are used during the Good Friday Gospel. Two cloths, previously set out on the altar, are removed by two deacons when the reader describes the parting of Christ’s garments, and the Passiontide veil is pulled down to symbolize the rending of the veil of the Temple at the words *consummatum est* (“It is finished”).⁶ The Feast of All Saints provided the opportunity for a degree of impersonation: the eighth lection, antiphon, and response are to be said by “scholars whose voice has not yet broken . . . dressed in the fashion of girls” (*scolaribus qui non mutaverunt vocem . . . parentur ad modum puellarum*). The eighth lection and response in the ceremonial are those of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. Furthermore, the boys

⁶ For other examples of the symbolic “parting of the garments” see Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, *The Quasi-Dramatic St. John Passions from Scandinavia and Their Medieval Background*, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Ser. 3 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1981), 27–28. It is worth noting that the St-Omer text describes the deacons as seizing the cloths in *modo raptarum* (de Pas, “Les cérémonies,” 107). There is none of the stealth found in the examples cited by Davidson. The inclusion of the tearing down of the veil at the *consummatum est* is also unusual since the rending of the veil is not referred to in John’s Gospel, only in Luke’s which was recited on the Wednesday of Holy Week; cf. Young, *Drama of the Medieval Church*, 1:101.

dressed as girls are to have “lighted lamps” (*lampades accensas*), making the parallel with the Wise Virgins explicit. The dramatic nature of the occasion is stressed by the warning that if “any of them missed out part of his role or did not complete it, he was to be disciplined by the schoolmaster afterwards” (203).

With all its attention to ceremonial and ritual, it would be surprising if the St-Omer *Rituale* did not include any actual liturgical plays. In fact, the only one in the manuscript is a short *Visitatio Sepulchri* of the kind described by Karl Young as “Stage 1”: the action is limited to the three Marys and the angels with no addition of Peter and John or the *Noli me tangere* scene.⁷ There is, however, one element which I believe to be unique. At midnight they assemble in the choir and, after singing the penitential psalms, proceed in procession to the tomb of St. Orner: “and there are three or four boys of the oldest scholars armed like soldiers who are lying there pretending to be asleep” (*et sunt ibi tres vel quatuor pueri de majoribus scolarum armati ad modum militum qui jacentes ibi fingunt se dormire* [176]). The priest takes the cross which is lying on the tomb under a pall and processes it back to the choir while they sing *Christus resurgens*. The bells ring. Then follows Matins with the *Visitatio* play: after the third responsory “three boys wearing dalmatics and having coifs or amices on their heads and holding phials in their hands, shall come in the manner of women . . .” (*tres pueri induti dalmaticis habentes capitegia vel amictas super capita sua tenentes tres phialas in manibus, venientes in modum mulierum . . .* [177]). The rest of the play is conventional, though it is worth noting that all the actors are boys, not men. The angels are described as being *parati in modum angelorum* with no details of their costume. The guards remain lying by the sepulcher throughout: *ubi jacent milites ut predictum est* (“where the soldiers are lying, as said before” [177]) . Young cites a few

⁷ See Young, *Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. 1, chap. 9

plays, though not this one, in which soldiers are involved in either words or actions, but the St-Omer *Visitatio* is the earliest from France and the only one I have found in which guards are already present at the mimed “resurrection.”⁸

The St-Omer *Rituale* offers a fascinating picture of church semi-dramatic ceremonial at a time and in an area where full-scale drama, albeit secular not religious, is well attested in the famous Arras plays of Adam de la Halle. St-Omer itself had a flourishing civic drama in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, at which time, as the accounts show, the church rituals were being maintained and even expanded. The major example of such expansion is the setting up by a will of 1543 of an *Aurea Missa* or Annunciation scene on the fourth Sunday in Advent when the Gospel for the day was the sending of the Archangel Gabriel (*Missa est . . .*). The text of the will and the 1577 inventory of church properties for the play have been printed by Young in his notes in the original French,⁹ so I give only a summary of the most interesting details. The Gospel of the day will proceed as usual up to the moment of “the angelic salutation, ‘Hail Mary.’ Then a small choirboy wearing an alb, dressed as an angel as they do for the feast of the Resurrection, [shall be] instructed by the singing master to do this and to sing with good tone and in an unhurried way [*a loisir*] all that is said in the Gospel by the angel, and from the left hand side of the high altar” (209). Another child representing the Virgin Mary “being dressed as a girl in the finest possible way” (*le plus honestement que faire se porra*) shall sing the other role, starting on the other side of the altar (209). The will includes money to pay the master to teach the children, 6 sous, and the children 6 sous between them for singing the office and praying for the soul of the founder. Other payments are to the carpenter for making two small identical

⁸ Ibid., vol. 1, chap. 13, esp. 408–10.

⁹ Robert Fabri’s will and inventory of costumes are printed in *ibid.*, 2:482–83.

platforms for the two actors, setting them in position “but not in the way” (*non empechans*) and taking them away afterwards. He shall receive 6 sous a year for this, and his boy for helping and storing the said scaffolds (*eschaffaulx*) in a suitable place shall have 3 sous. A woman shall dress the child who plays the Virgin Mary and receive 6 sous. Is this the earliest theatrical dresser? According to the inventory, the Virgin was dressed in a garment of white damask and another of cloth embroidered with gold thread and silk flowers with two fringed and gold-embroidered sleeves; there is also a wig and a gilded wooden crown with a small cross in front as well as a matching scepter for the angel. The clothes and props and hangings for the platforms are all kept together in a leather coffer, according to the inventory of 1577, and hence it is clear that good use was made of Robert Fabri’s bequest.

The *Rituale* is dated about 1290, the inventory of materials for the Golden Mass is nearly three centuries later, and it seems likely that the traditions continued at least until the Revolution. Some of them, as de Pas attested, were still being performed in the nineteenth century: the St-Omer church ceremonial tradition is a rich and lasting one.

Reprinted from The EDAM Newsletter 9:1 (Fall 1986):7-12. The author was a frequent contributor to the publications of the Early Drama, Art, and Music project and served on the Advisory Board. Her last work was Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama (Cambridge University Press, 2007). Until her retirement she was a Reader in French at the University of Leeds.