1991

Laughter, Game, and Ambiguous Comedy in the South English Legendary

Gregory M. Sadlek
Cleveland State University, G.SADLEK@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Publisher’s Statement

This is an Author’s Accepted Manuscript of an article published in Studia Neophilologica, 1991 available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/00393279208588085.

Original Published Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.
Laughter, Game, and Ambiguous Comedy in the South English Legendary

GREGORY M. SADLEK

I.
Laughable saints are no laughing matter. They raise too many troubling questions for those who seek to understand and interpret medieval sacred biography. Indeed, whether humor even exists in the genre is a serious question that goes back at least as far as Ernst Robert Curtius, who, after surveying a number of very early Latin vitae and passiones, argues:

Humoristic elements ... [were] a part of the style of the medieval vita sancti. They were present in the material itself, but we may be sure that the public expected them as well.¹

Some believe that Curtius' argument still needs to be made. For example, in the course of her recent attempt to find humor in Geoffrey Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale, Anne Eggebroten chides scholars who, in her opinion, do not take the possibility of humor in sacred biography seriously enough.² Among those brought forth for criticism are D. W. Robertson, Sherry Reames, and Donald Howard, none of whom see much to laugh at in Chaucer's legend of St. Cecilia. Nevertheless, Robertson and Howard do not explicitly deny the possibility of humor in sacred biography although they both argue that medieval audiences read vitae not for the surface meaning but for the abstract sentence. Moreover, Reames, although she can find none of the usual clues to signal Chaucerian irony or comedy in the Second Nun's Tale, does not seem to deny the possibility that saints' lives could evoke laughter.³

Eggebroten raises, albeit indirectly, another serious question when she argues that it would be wrong for audiences to find St. Cecilia herself to be the butt of Chaucer's comedy (p. 57). Even if a critic grants that humor can be found in sacred biography, he or she can ask whether comedy in a given legend is appropriate or whether it breaks hagiographical decorum. Given representative definitions of the genre, laughter directed at a saint rather than at his unbelieving antagonists would seem to undermine the purpose of sacred biography. For example, Hippolyte Delehaye argues that, for a text to be properly classified as a saint's legend, it is not sufficient that it merely contain biographical information about a saint. He contends that "pour être strictement hagiographique, [un] document doit avoir un caractère religieux et se proposer un but d'édition."⁴ Thomas Heffernan argues that teaching, not edification, is the primary goal of sacred biography.⁵ Nevertheless, whether its primary object is to teach or to edify, the genre does its work primarily by offering the life of the saint as a paradigm for the faithful to imitate. A saint's life edifies, writes Gordon Gerould, by "glorifying the memory of its subject" (p. 5). Heffernan states that paradigmatic action rather than theological argument is the "idiom of sacred biography" (p. 6).

If, then, humor directed at the protagonist robs a text's audience of a saintly model to admire and to imitate, how can it be properly classified as sacred biography? Since its high legendary subject matter is treated in a low, disrespectful manner, might it not be more appropriate to classify such a text as hagiographical burlesque? Such a conclusion would be based on the assumption that clear lines of
demarcation existed between sacred biography and other medieval genres. Hefferman notes, however, that "rhetorical traditions governing the genre loosened somewhat" beginning in the thirteenth century (p. 14). Moreover, Dieter Mehl argues that the boundary between Middle English sacred biography and romance was fluid. Hence, "inappropriate" laughter in a saint's life might also indicate that an author is striking out beyond traditional generic boundaries, that the text in question, with characteristics of both romance and sacred biography, occupies a generic middle ground. The answer to my second question hinges, it would seem, on whether a text is seen to foster disrespect or simple diversion.

II

This background is helpful to readers of The South English Legendary (SEL), a late thirteenth-century collection of Middle English vitae and temporale texts in rhymed, seven-beat couplets. Humor has long been taken to be, if not the hallmark, at least a noteworthy characteristic of this legendary. For example, Laurel Nichols Braswell, whose dissertation contains a short treatment of SEL humor, argues that, while the tone of Jacobus de Voragine's Legenda Aurea, the thirteenth-century Latin legendary from which many of the SEL vitae were adapted, is one of sustained gravitas, that of the SEL is generally lightened by humor or festivitas. Klaus Jankofsky also finds that humor is a key element in the collection. He notes that the SEL texts often contain a "grim humor," reminiscent of that found in the Middle English romance. However, Jankofsky identifies no inappropriate humor or parody in the collection. On the contrary, he argues that, because of their humor and drama, the SEL vitae are effective examples of sacred biography. They present, he remarks, saints who are "outstanding, specially noted people who belong to both worlds...model[s] of exceptional behavior" (pp. 708, 715-16).

Although late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers of the legendary were sometimes offended by its lurid passages, later critics have agreed with Jankofsky that the legendary performed its didactic function well. Theodor Wolpers, for example, writes:

Wie geschieht die verschiedenartigen Materialien trotz ihrer Eigenfarbe dem erbauelichen Anliegen untergeordnet und in die legendarische Darstellung einbezogen werden, haben die Einzelinterpretationen gezeigt.

The skillful subordination of the SEL's entertainment to its didactic mission is not always obvious, however. In this article, I examine the humor in two of the SEL's vitae, the lives of Sts. Alphege and Vincent, in order to illustrate (1) how the texts evoke laughter, either accidentally or self-consciously; (2) why this laughter may be inappropriate; and (3) what this laughter may indicate about the generic classification of SEL texts. Following such theorists as Freud, Bergson, and Neil Schaeffer, I accept incongruity, exaggerated repetition, degradation, sarcasm, invective, and wordplay as significant comic cues. Moreover, although I do not here attempt to construct a comprehensive theory of medieval humor, I also show how contextual evidence suggests that medieval and twentieth-century perceptions of the comic in "St. Vincent" may well be at odds.

III

The SEL life of St. Alphege begins with Alphege, a nobleman, giving up a rich heritage to become a monk. He is later consecrated Bishop of Winchester and, later
still, Archbishop of Canterbury. When the Danes invade England and lay siege to
Canterbury, Alphege nobly offers his own life for those of his flock.

Little humor is present in the story thus far, but the tone soon becomes ambiguous.
While Alphege languishes in the Danish prison, the devil appears to him in the
guise of an angel. After reminding Alphege that Sts. Peter and Paul both escaped
from prison and warning him against pride, the devil orders Alphege to escape
“froto saui Engelond.”13 Heeding an apparently reasonable admonition, Alphege
follows his guide, but the devil leads him on a long, pointless march through the
Kentish swamplands. As the SEL writer tells it:

pe deuel him ladde uorpe  que saui a fouel slade
Ouer water and ouer ope  pat al he was biwade
Ouer dich and ouer heg  and ouer many a voule sio
He hurled his holyman  pat wel feble was perto. (lines 113–16)

Confused, tired, splattered with mud, and left by the devil in a pool of “grislish
water,” Alphege finally realizes that he has been misled and calls on God for help.
When a real angel appears, however, he shows no compassion. Instead, he greets
him with the words “pou fool” (line 138) and lectures him as if he were a child
catching playing with matches. The angel concludes: “To prison go anon azen  &
neuer eft out ne flee/For pou sset for pe leue of God  to morwe imarried beo”
(lines 43–44). Alphege then finds his way back to prison to accept his tortures and
eventual death.

Although different readers may perceive the degree of humor in this passage
differently, I believe that the SEL writer evokes notable humor through Alphege’s
degradation. Moreover, the humor seems inappropriate because the audience is
invited to laugh at the saint rather than at the devil. Little is done here to evoke
sympathy for Alphege. Rather, the angel, giving the audience its cue on how to
react, chastises and even vilifies him. Alphege is no heroic martyr here but rather a
mere mortal, who, like a clown, appears in the text with torn clothes and muddy
face. The writer delights in lingering over each new indignity he suffers. He evokes
the physical aspects of the saint when his spiritual side should have been empha-
sed, one of the hallmarks of comedy (Bergson, p. 53).

Moreover, no theological or moral justification for the humiliation is given.
Alphege does not complain about his lot before the devil arrives; on the contrary, to
save his people he gives himself into the hands of the Danes. Furthermore, the devil
does not argue that Alphege should selfishly save himself. Rather, he presents
escape as the altruistic choice— io save England. Thus, in terms of what the story
gives us, Alphege makes a perfectly rational, selfless decision. Although one might
argue that a potential martyr ought never escape from prison, the devil’s reminder
of the escapes of Sts. Peter and Paul undercuts the argument.

The SEL’s comedy can be highlighted by comparing it to one of its sources,
Osburn’s Vita Sancti Alphegi, written in 1070, about sixty years after the saint’s
death.14 Osburn’s vita, a fuller account of the saint’s life than that found in the SEL,
contains a brief narration of the martyr’s midnight escapade, but the tone and the
presentation of Osburn’s account clearly differ from those in the later text. First of
all, Osburn supplies a motive for the devil’s trick: the devil, frustrated by his
inability to break Alphege by torture, decides to use guile. Osburn writes: “Tegit
ergo argumentum furoris velarii pietatis; fraudet vonatur elidere, quem terroris
magnitudine non potuit superare.”15 Clearly Osburn wishes to present Alphege as a
heroic martyr, whose courage could not be broken by ordinary physical torture. He
conceives the episode as only another trial in Alphege's passion. Further, he does not try for comic effect by dwelling on the indignities suffered by the saint in his journey through the marshlands. Osbern says simply that he who dared to tempt Christ in the desert led Alphege forth from prison and, after traversing many watery lands, disappeared (p. 139).

One of the greatest differences between the two Alpheges is that Osbern's protagonist is eloquent. When abandoned in the marsh, he compiles a long prayer for divine assistance. As soon as the angel appears the following morning, Alphege excuses himself to the angel by saying that he did not flee the prison on his own accord, but, rather, because he thought that it was God's will (p. 139).

Finally, Osbern's angel speaks to the saint in a different tone of voice. He calls him "amice" and patiently explains that the devil used this approach only because he was unsuccessful in his other, more direct attempts. At the end of the passage, angel and saint part from each other on a happy note: "Elphegus igitur ad locum certaminis ab Angelo revocatus, laetus expectabat horam, quo a Deo percept coronam" (p. 139). In short, little humor is found in Osbern's account throughout the passage the audience is invited to sympathize with Alphege, not to distance themselves from him. Osbern does his best to downplay the potentially embarrassing physical details and to glorify the actions of his protagonist. It was the SEL writer, then, who seemingly first capitalized on the incident's comic potential. Perhaps the SEL writer believed that the episode could be made into a harmless comic interlude and that Alphege's eventual good end, his martyrdom, would redeem his temporary loss of dignity. Given the historical considerations discussed below, this is likely. However, no contextual considerations justify the comic degradation of the saint in this particular passage. The legend's humor, then, subverts the legendary's didactic mission.

The comic effect, however, may have been unintended. The mere difference in length between the SEL vita and its source accounts for part of the problem. "Abbreviated legendaries" were first created around 1250 and associated with the mendicants. It has long been clear that the SEL writers were among these "abbreviators," who wished to make moral and theological texts more available to the lay public. While their goals were noble, my analysis suggests that, in the process of abbreviating their sources, they at times cut away too much explanatory material and left their texts "detruncata" or "mutilata," a charge leveled at Jacobus de Voragine by Bernard Gui. By using simplification in order to reach a wider audience, the SEL writers may at times have inadvertently created inappropriate comedy and, thus, weakened their texts as sacred biography.

Even if the humor in "St. Alphege" is intended, however, it does not necessarily follow that it is either blasphemous or useless. There is place for humor in religious writings. M. Conrad Hyers, for example, argues that, although the comic can pose a danger to the sacred by negating the proper distance between the sacred and the profane, the sacred needs the comic. "The profanation of the sacred," he writes, "keeps the religious cosmos and the moral cosmos both psychologically and ontologically human" by deflating religious pretentiousness. In "St. Alphege," sainthood is humanized through laughter, but in the context of the whole legend, this laughter is grounded neither in unbelief nor in the intention to blaspheme. Thus, although the comic here breaks hagiographical decorum, it represents merely a short interlude in the serious work of teaching and edification that is carried out in the legendary as a whole.
The central comic device in the SEL’s “St. Vincent” is exaggerated repetition in the brutal contest of wills between the evil prefect, Dacian, and Vincent. The two antagonists lash seven times, and, once begun, these rounds follow each other quickly. In the space of one hundred lines, Vincent is scourged twice, hung on a gibbet, burnt at the stake, fried on a white-hot grill, sprinkled with salt, and thrown into a dark prison cell “so full of swordes pointes i-pigte: asse mode is ful of gras.”

The SEL account contains, in fact, more tortures for Vincent than the accounts in either Prudentius’ Peristephanon or Jacobus de Voragine’s Legenda Aurea. However, mere multiplication of tortures in sacred biography is not a sign of comedy. As Delhaye has noted, sacred biographers multiplied tortures to “improve” their accounts and to increase edification (pp. 107–10). The seriousness of Vincent’s tortures would be unquestioned if it were not for other comic mechanisms in the tale.

In the SEL, Dacian is clearly a comic character because throughout the legend he is constantly degraded. He begins as a self-confident ruler, but as his henchmen fail him, he is put into the humiliating position of having to torture his own men as punishment for their incompetence. Dacian’s frustration grows until, after applying seven ineffective tortures, he capitulates and orders Vincent placed on the soft bed where the martyr finally dies. After Vincent is reported dead, Dacian attempts to have the final victory by defiling the saint’s corpse. Nevertheless, his attempts to do so inevitably fail, and he is led to a final cry of despair: “‘Alas, alas, ’ he king seide: ‘pe schame and pe schonde! / We ne mowe him neure ouer-corne : quik ne ded. a-watere ne a-londe’” (lines 163–64). A man so powerless that he cannot even defeat a corpse is indeed pitiful, but the SEL audience is nowhere invited to empathize with Dacian. Rather, because he is a stock villain, the audience is distanced from his sufferings. They laugh, then, at his degradation. They laugh out of a sense of superiority; they laugh at the incongruity of the powerlessness of worldly power; and they laugh at his thoughtless, inelastic behavior.

If Dacian is a comic buffoon in “St. Vincent,” it would seem to follow that Vincent, the “hero,” should be taken seriously. However, there is evidence in the text that he, too, either purposely or inadvertently, may be comic. On the one hand, the SEL writers are clearly trying to present Vincent as a heroic martyr, who, according to F. J. E. Raby, is:

[an aggressive soldier of faith. Fearless, uncompromising, proud and violent, he is always master of the situation. He is strong, his enemies are feeble. No torture can daunt him; the taunt of his judge is powerless to devise a torture which can produce more than a contemptuous smile. In the agony of death, he calmly addresses his tormentors, often at tedious length. . . . [The] end comes only when he has said enough.]

If one excludes the last sentence, this is an apt description of the SEL St. Vincent. On the other hand, however, the text never gets far into a justification of Vincent’s sufferings. Never, for example, does it go beyond the surface level of the narration to conspicuously work at its presumed goal of edification. Never is the saint’s interrogation offered as a forum for theological and moral sermonizing. Never does Vincent address his tormentors “at tedious length” although, as Delhaye remarks, the saint’s interrogation was traditionally a favorite place for hagiographers’ elaborations (Légendes, p. 106). Stripped of their theological rationale, the saint’s actions seem just as ludicrously repetitious as those of Dacian. Given that the SEL is an
abbreviated legendary, this lack of explanatory background is not surprising. However, the text seems purposely to distance the audience from his sufferings.

The audience is distanced from Vincent’s sufferings for several reasons. First, although SEL narrators are often intrusive, Vincent’s pain elicits no authorial comment. Moreover, Vincent’s own reactions encourage distance. Far from weeping, moaning, or crying out, Vincent laughs after each round of torture. In fact, he laughs so much that the tone of the whole passage seems cheerful. Vincent sees his own passion as dark comedy. After he is first beaten, Vincent “leijen … gan well smere” (line 25). When Dacian decides to hang him on a gibbet, “Vinceent for loie bi-gan to eorne” toward the device (line 55). What’s more, the audience is told “he longore pat he bare heng: be more loie he made” (line 59). When a fire is prepared for him, “be holi man wende in-to þe fyer: ase gladliche ase to one feste” (line 70). Later, when placed on a glowing iron grill, “þe louȝ smere” (line 88), and he laughs again when his blood spurts onto nearby rooftops (line 99). In so joyful a mood is Vincent that he even can manage a joke in the manner of St. Lawrence. When sprinkled with salt meant to irritate his wounds, Vincent retorts, “þe . . . þis is a swete feste!” (line 97).

Another reason that the vita appears comic is that Vincent casts his passion as a game. At the beginning he says: “Nov ich hopie to habbe game” (line 21). Since martyrs were often pictured as God’s athletes, the presentation of Vincent as a competitor is not without precedent. However, while “game” here could simply mean “contest,” it also could mean “joy,” “pleasure,” “delight,” “mirth,” “festivity,” “amusement,” or even “a joke.” Vincent’s behavior during the confrontation makes one or more of these other interpretations just as likely as the first.

Although Vincent uses the word ludus to describe his passion in the accounts of both Prudentius and Jacobus, in the SEL the passion is presented as a “game” in several additional ways. First, the SEL writer lets Vincent formulate the “rules” of the game in the following way: “Nov ich hopie to habbe game: ffor erere me boute longe: hit [the torments] schal me tuyrme to loye and gleo: and þe to pines stronge.” The basic struggle in the vita is, thus, not overtly over a question of faith but over Dacian’s attempt to overthrow Vincent’s “rules.” Part of the humor of the game comes from the incongruity of these rules, which decree that the tormentor must be tormented by his own designs. Furthermore, the writer makes sure that these rules are repeated or alluded to constantly (lines 35–36, 39–40, 48–52, 59–60, 87–90, 99–100, 117–22). Second, the writer emphasizes the game by increasing the number of tortures and, hence, rounds of the game.

Third, the writer focuses on the game by ignoring the theological or moral background, whose inclusion would have pointed to the world beyond the “playground” in which this game has real consequences. In other words, in a move that seems uncharacteristically literary, the writer seems to privilege his thematic metaphor, “the game,” over the didactic imperative of sacred biography. His “chaff” is raised above the “fruit.” No attempt is made to reveal the saint’s inner peace, his otherworldly faith, or his hope of eternal reward. Only once, when he sings merrily in his prison cell, does the audience hear him address God (lines 117–18). More often, they hear only of his unbalanced joy in pain. Deprived of essential motivation, Vincent seems a kind of cartoon character. His actions become “gestures,” which, according to Bergson, are the focus of good comedy (p. 143). Hence, evidence from the legend itself suggests that the medieval audience responded to Vincent’s character with disrespectful laughter, a response that would imply that “St. Vincent” slips into burlesque.
Even the earliest versions of the Vincent legend contain humor, but it is clearly
directed at Daedalian alone. In Prudentius's *Peristephanon*, Datianus cries, screams,
throws tantrums, gnashes his teeth, and foams at the mouth in frustration over his
inability to subdue Vincent's spirit. However, while Datianus has all the qualities of
a comic villain, Vincent never loses his dignity, even if he too describes his tortures
as a game (lines 61–64). Despite his laughter and bravado, the audience continues to
esteem Prudentius' Vincent because he, like Osbern's Alphege, retains his elo-
ce throughout the story. In long passages he explains in detail that he is willing
to undergo the horrible tortures not because he enjoys them, but because the
integrity of the soul is much more important than the integrity of the body (lines
157–64, for example). Thus, the audience is assured that Vincent is rational and at
peace. His poetic description of the soul, which remains free, quiet, and unbroken
within his fragile body, reveals his unshakable faith in the afterlife and, thus,
justifies his behavior.

V

While an analysis of the *SEL's* "St. Vincent" in isolation suggests that its hero is a
laughable figure, consideration of the *vita's* context in the history of late medieval
ideals of sanctity makes this conclusion less certain. Although Vincent's behavior
in the *SEL* text is outlandish and extreme, recent scholarship on late medieval
sacred biography indicates that these qualities were characteristic of the epoch's
conception of sanctity. Reames, for example, argues that the narratives in the
*Legenda Aurea*, the most popular abbreviated legendary of its day, characteris-
tically focus on confrontation and displays of saintly power (*Legenda Aurea*, pp. 62,
269). Richard Kieckheffer writes that fourteenth-century hagiographical autobi-
ography emphasizes drama, exuberant austerity, and outlandish overstatement (pp.
1–2, 7, 199–200). André Vauchez finds that most popular saints of the era were
killed unjustly—although not necessarily in the act of defending the faith. The
suffering of an unjust death, he observes, evoked veneration from the uneducated
lay even if the victim was a dog (p. 180). Moreover, in late-medieval England the
cult of the martyr, following the precedent set by Thomas a Becket, was especially
strong. In fact, all of the English saints proclaimed between the thirteenth and the
fifteenth centuries were aristocrats, lay or clerical, who opposed royal power. Against
such a background, Vincent's manner of acting, even without didactic
glosses, would probably have been perceived as consistent with contemporary ideals
of sainthood.

On the subject of didactic glosses, both Reames and Kieckheffer find that the
explicit theological background found in earlier legends is characteristically not
given in late medieval sacred biography. In fact, Reames shows that, from very early
on, Jacobus was criticized more for what he excised from his sources (i.e., the
explanatory background) than for what he kept from them (*Legenda Aurea*, pp.
85–87). Kieckheffer notes this same phenomenon in fourteenth-century hagi-
ographic autobiographies. Comparing these to Augustine's *Confessions*, he notes:

Whereas Augustine set forth in his autobiography a theology of Christian life, the autobi-
ographical works of the late Middle Ages tend to contain only implicit theology. (p. 7)

Furthermore, he argues that the theology implied in these *vitae* is unbalanced and
extreme (p. 12). These observations support Heffernan's argument, noted earlier,
that paradigmatic action rather than theological argument is the idiom of sacred biography. They also suggest that Raby’s statement about the place of theological sermonizing in sacred biography, also noted earlier, is more suited to early rather than late medieval texts.

Given this background, it is likely that Vincent’s manner of acting in the SEL was seen as playful but not laughable. Unlike their predecessors, late medieval hagiographers assumed that their thoroughly Christianized audience would automatically read into the texts the essential, other-worldly motivation necessary to take the martyrs seriously. Moreover, the SEL texts were not experienced in a vacuum. If, as many scholars believe, the SEL narratives were delivered orally, it is possible that conscientious preachers may well have added explanatory materials as they delivered them. Reames, for example, argues that Jacobus intended his clerical audience to add such materials whenever they used the Legenda Aurea as a source for preaching (Legenda Aurea, p. 87).

If not burlesque, what, then, was the intention of the SEL writer? Evidence from the SEL’s “Banna Sanctorum” suggests that the SEL school of writers conceived their saints as “hardy knítges,” whose vitæ were acceptable substitutes for secular romance. The prologue states:

Men wilne muche to hure telle • of bataille of kyng
And of knítges bat hardy were • bat muchedel is lesyng
Wo so wilne muche to hure • tales of suche jingle
Hardi batailles he may hure • here pat nis no lesyng
Of apostles & martýrs • bat hardy knítges were
bat studeust were in bataille • & ne fleide nost for fere

If the vitæ are battle stories, it makes sense that pure aggressivity and courage would be celebrated in them. In another place, the writer compares Christianity to a plant whose roots are watered by the blood of Christ and his martyrs (lines 1–20). One could argue, then, that Vincent’s motivation becomes clear against the background of the “Banna Sanctorum.” The Vincent legend, however, may antedate the “Banna,” and it is unclear under which circumstances, if any, the intended audience would have been made aware of it.

In his book on Middle English romances, Dieter Mehl suggests that a working definition of “romance” in late medieval England was simply a “good story” about a hero (p. 17). The SEL’s “St. Vincent,” then, is a good example of a text that straddles the boundaries of sacred biography and romance. As we have seen, the writer works to highlight the text’s value as pure entertainment. He underscores the protagonist’s courage and playful audacity. He multiplies his adventures. He distances the audience from the emotional impact of Vincent’s terrible sufferings by lightening the tone of the narrative with laughter and presenting the passion as a game. In such a context, Vincent’s tortures evoke less pity than do Lancelot’s wounds from crossing the sword bridge.

Although the legend’s lack of explicit theological motivation makes its comedy double-edged or at least ambiguous for twentieth-century readers, there is no evidence that this comedy is rooted in disrespect. Unlike the SEL’s “St. Alphege,” it is not probable that the text contains burlesque. Nevertheless, it is also not probable that the legend’s entertainment is totally subordinated to its didactic mission. A touch of Vincent’s audacity, then, can be seen in the writer’s relaxed attitude toward the traditional models of sacred biography. For twentieth-century readers as for, apparently, their late medieval counterparts, the writer’s daring adds to the legend’s
value and should raise it, someday, to a higher place in the canon of Middle English literature.

The University of Nebraska at Omaha

NOTES

1 This article is based on a paper delivered at the Ninth Annual Medieval/Renaissance Conference at Barnard College, November 1987. A Margaret Bundy Scott Fellowship from Hamilton College afforded me the time to revise and enlarge it.


10 John Wells is one such offended critic. See A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1936-1400. New Haven, 1926, p. 301.


17 Quoted in Reaney, Legenda Aurea, p. 63. Nevertheless, this "mutilation" apparently fit late-medieval English tastes, for, if judged by the number of extant manuscripts, the SEL was the fourth most popular literary production of the Middle English period. (See Charlotte D’Evelyn, "Saints’ Legends", A Manual of Writings in Middle English, ed. J. Burke Severs, Hamden. 1970, p. 413.) This fact alone should give pause to anyone arguing that saints’ legends were read solely for their abstract meaning.


19 Jankowski highlights the SEL’s tendency to "humanize" the saints on several occasions. See "Personalized Didacticism: The Interplay of Narrator and Subject Matter in the South

20 Carl Horstmann, ed., The Early South English Legendary: E.E.T.S., o.s., no. 87, London, 1887, p. 187. Subsequent quotations from “St. Vincent” will be taken from Horstmann’s edition and cited in the text by line number(s). I cite Horstmann’s edition here rather than D’Evelyn’s because it presents, in my opinion, a clearer state of the legend.

21 Görlach writes that the source of the SEL’s “St. Vincent” has not yet been established. However, he reports that in some long passages “the SEL seems to follow the LgA [Legenda Aurea]” (p. 139). For the purposes of this essay, it is illuminating to compare the SEL account to the early passio in Prudentius’s Persiophanon as well as to Jacobus’ account.


23 This is not true in other parts of the legendary. For example, when in the SEL’s “St. Peter” the protagonist is nailed to his cross, the narrator exclaims: “Louerd, strong was is pine” (D’Evelyn, South English Legendary, 1:263). See Jankowski’s comments on the characteristic authorial intrusions in the SEL (“Entertainment”, p. 709).

24 Delehaye, Passions, p. 211.


26 Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, Persiophanum, in Aurelii Prudentii Clemensii Carmine, ed. Maurice Cunningham, Corpus Christianorum, Turnhout, 1966, line 64 (p. 296), and Jacobus de Voragine, Legenda Aurea: Vulgo Historia Lombardica Dicata, ed. Teodor Graesse, 3rd ed., 1890, reprint ed., Osnabrück, 1956, p. 120.


28 See Bergson’s comments on “the villain who is the victim of his own villainy” as a classic comic inversion (pp. 94-95).

29 On the disinterested nature of game, see Huizinga, p. 9.

30 On comedy’s dependence on a “ludicrous context”, see Schaeffer, pp. 16-19.


32 Vauchez, p. 200. One example is Thomas of Cantaloupe, Bishop of Hereford, who died in 1282, in exactly the period (1270-85) of the SEL’s first compilation (Görlich, p. 38). Given that Thomas was a fierce and pugnacious defender of the rights of the church against all external powers (Vauchez, p. 199) and given his geographical and temporal proximity to the earliest states of the SEL, one wonders if his particular example did not influence the ideals found in “St. Vincent”.

33 Braswell, pp. 268-69, and Jankowski, “Entertainment”, p. 709, both write that the legendary was presented orally. Annie Samson, however, argues the contrary, that evidence from the legendary does not support the opinion that the SEL was delivered publicly, either in a liturgical or a non-literurgical setting (“The South English Legendary: Constructing a Context”, in Thirteenth-Century England: Proceedings on the Newcastle upon Tyne Conference 1985, ed. P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd. Woodbridge, 1986, pp. 180-91).

34 D’Evelyn, “Banna Sanetorum”. The South English Legendary, lines 59-64 (1:3).

35 The “Banna” has been called the “A Prologue”, but Thomas Lizska argues that it is more likely to have been conceived as a transitional piece between the SEL’s temporale and sanctoriale texts (“The First ‘A’ Redaction of the South English Legendary: Information from the ‘Prologue’”, Modern Philology. 82. 1985, pp. 409-10. Hence, it was probably composed after the first, “Z”, redaction was completed.

36 See Chretien de Troyes, Lancelot or the Knight of the Cart, ed. and transl. William Kibler, Garland Library of Medieval Literature. New York, 1981, lines 3041-117 (pp. 128-31). Lancelot here is strikingly similar to Vincent. He also laughs at his trials (line 3078). Moreover, love, says Chretien, made his suffering a pleasure: “Amors qui le conduit et mainne, ‘S’i li estoit a soffrir dor’ (lines 3114-15).